

# **Caste and Exclusion: Issues of Theory and Policy<sup>⊗</sup>**

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The political discourse of exclusion and the making of social policies in India are conventionally centered on the issue of caste, and have lately extended to religious identities. I have dealt with the issue of religious identities elsewhere. (mahajan-Jodhka) Here I shall focus on the established academic and political practice of problematizing exclusion in terms of caste. My larger objective, however, is to critically examine the prevailing theoretical perspective on caste and, in the process, reformulate some propositions on caste from the perspective of political theory. This, I hope, will enable a more direct and precise understanding of contemporary structures of social exclusion in today's India.

Before I proceed further, I wish to flag three theoretically interrelated points/issues which I shall elaborate with a view to developing a political-theoretical perspective on caste. First, while many forms of exclusion are structurally integral to caste there also are, and have always been there, those unrelated to the hierarchical caste, as well as the ones representing combination of the caste and non-caste elements. Second in making a social policy for combating exclusion it is crucial to take account of the historically changed political-cultural context of social exclusion, i.e modernity, nation-state, democracy and now globalization. Third, such profound ideological and structural changes have occurred in the caste system especially after independence, that it is theoretically inappropriate to describe India's stratificatory system primarily in caste terms. My overall argument is that predominance of the ritual-hierarchical theory of caste has prevented policies from taking cognizance of new forms of exclusion even as the theory continue to

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obfuscate the terms of discourse on older forms of exclusion, such as untouchability and social backwardness.

## I

### **The Theory–Policy nexus**

Two distinct, but mutually complimentary social-anthropological theories have shaped the perspective on caste that has dominated not only the theoretical and empirical research on caste, but the policy discourse and even common sense about social exclusion. These theories have grown out of two major structuralist traditions: one founded by the French social anthropologist Levis-Strauss and the other by the British social anthropologist Redcliff Brown. The Levis-Straussian structuralism is stretched and adapted by Luis Dumont and the Redclif-Brownian structural-functionalism is empirically opened up and enhanced by M.N. Srinivas, respectively in their studies of Indian caste. I am aware of the sharp internal differences between the exponents of these two structuralist schools, but they together have, in my view, contributed to a certain common understanding of caste; i.e, viewing caste as an ideological structure and a social system that continually arranges and re-arranges statuses in vertical hierarchies according to its *internal*, binary principle of ritual purity versus impurity—purity being epitomized in the topmost status in the hierarchy, (the brahman), and the impurity being densely concentrated in the bottom most status, (the untouchable). Between these two ideological/structural poles which define the caste hierarchy, statuses of groups within the hierarchy may vary, overlap or even change over time and across spaces in the degree of purity or impurity they represent. But the overall structure and the rituality principle dispensing statuses to groups is invariant. It is this principle that has engendered a more or less permanent and holistic structural character to caste.

This view of caste did not remain confined to the academic discourse. It found its way—through the expert advice of leading sociologists (the list among others included Professor M.N.Srinivas) to the Mandal Commission—In the policy discourse which privileged ritual status of a caste as the main criterion for determining its social and educational backwardness.

It is only recently that caste is being seen as a hierarchically patterned system of substantially existing *communities* which struggle and horizontally compete for resources--social, cultural, political and economic--on the ground; in the process, routinely flaunting the rules of rituality and wresting themselves loose and away from the straitjacket of ritual hierarchy. The social policy, however, continue to remain in the grip of the conventional structuralist theories and identifies victims of social exclusion in terms of their *traditional, ritually ascribed* disabilities. As such, benefits of the policy remain by and large confined to members of certain involuntary, hereditary groups located at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy i.e., (the lower sudras) as well as those defined out of the sacred ideological frame of social hierarchy; ie., the outcaste and the aboriginal groups. Consequently, exclusions based on gender discrimination, endemic poverty, cultural marginalization of religious, linguistic and racial minorities, regional backwardness, old age and physical disability have been inadequately addressed. Also, exclusions experienced by individuals, households and localities on dimensions not accounted by existing social justice policies, such as vastly unequal patterns of income distribution, spatial divisions and segregations in housing (e.g. slumming and communal ghettoization) especially in towns and cities, unequal access to education and the school system and to health and the hospital services do not constitute among core concerns for social policy-making and theorizing social justice.

Worse, the predominance of ritual-status theory of caste has blinded scholars, as well as policy makers, to the emergence of new 'untouchables'—the untouchables of Development--the people whom the market model of (capitalist) development has not, and will perhaps never touch. This is the left-out, under-

class of Development. Admittedly, this underclass comprises largely of the ex-untouchables and the tribals (the SCs and the STs) but it also includes numerous occupational groups whose skills and crafts have been rendered defunct by development and are pushed in a perpetual state of penury. Also, the ritual status criterion fails to take account of the growing phenomenon of downward social mobility of significant numbers of the so called upper caste households joining ranks of the working class (Ref. CSDS Surveys). In short, problematizing exclusion purely in ritual status terms has prevented theorization of social justice from accounting a wide range of social facts contributing to creating conditions of injustice in the society.

Thus, even though it is empirically true that the non-caste type of social exclusion is experienced widely by those belonging to the lowest rungs of the traditional hierarchy, it does not constitute a sufficient ground to justify the argument—often made in the discourse of social justice in India—that all contemporary forms of exclusion are symptomatic of the caste system, constructed by the theory as an undimensional hierarchy of ritual statuses. Inequalities and exclusions arising from contemporary forces of modernism, nationalism, developmentalism and Globalism remain by and large unrecognized.

This is not to deny that certain social groups have been systemically deprived and discriminated on account of their traditional ritual status, and that Reservations for them is justified. But the terms of justifications used in defense of the policy are often unjustifiable. First, recognition of a ritual status group as a permanent *policy category* for dispensing or withholding development and welfare benefits *totalizes* a community which in reality has been an internally highly differentiated, and an amorphous social-political formation. Such recognition lends a tradition-like perianality to the policy. In fact every smaller and specific ritual-status group of the caste hierarchy today is internally divided along the economic, educational, social and even cultural dimensions. The result is that while some sections of a traditionally lower ritual status group may continue to experience exclusion, others of the same group no longer do. Such

differentiations are usually ignored in the social-justice discourse and in policy making.

Non-recognition of internal, structural divisions within a caste group is one reason why no forceful argument has emerged for exiting from reservations those sub-groups and households of a caste which may have ceased to be backward. It should be remembered that low ritual status is not in itself a criterion for identifying a beneficiary group. In principle the reservation policy recognizes a social group for benefits not because of its low ritual status per se, but because of strong historical association of the low ritual status with social deprivation and disprivilege which have resulted in its contemporary condition of social, economic and educational backwardness. Once the association (correlation) between the ritual status and social deprivation (and backwardness) empirically ceases, ritual status must lose its relevance for the policy.

Second, a 'high' ritual status group has ceased to be a relevant consideration for receiving any institutional advantage. Today, the advantage of belonging to a 'high' ritual status group accrue, as it may to any caste group through forming nepotistic networks or may lie in cultivating self-appeasing private thoughts about one's ritual status. With ritual status getting detached from social status, ritual status has become a rapidly disintegrating social category. But the policy continues to treat it as a durable, even a permanent category.

Third, Reservations plug but one source of social discrimination and exclusion in contemporary India. As such it has considerably restricted the erstwhile upper castes from using their historically accumulated status resources to prevent those at the lower rungs from accessing modern and democratic means of upward social mobility. Democratic politics accompanied by Reservations have indeed thwarted such negative developments. In this sense Reservations should be seen as a policy not about privileging one set of ritual statuses and disprivileging the other. It is a policy meant to address the issue of acute social-inequalities created by accumulated social and economic capital of the erstwhile

higher-status groups and severe capital deficit and resource-lessness of the lower-status groups of the old hierarchy. In fact it is, and must be seen as a *secular policy* for removal of backwardness of groups belonging to different castes as well as religious communities.

Thus the theory by viewing ritual hierarchical caste as the governing principle of the contemporary stratificatory system, and the policy by privileging, in practice, the ritual status of a caste for dispensing social justice have resulted in disempowerment of individuals *qua* citizens. Such systemic privileging of collectivities has led to unacceptable degree of tolerance by democratic institutions of violation of rights and dignity of *individual* citizens. To put it more concretely problematising social inequality and exclusion primarily in collectivist, ritual-status terms may altogether exclude from democratic discourse and politics those citizens and households lying at the bottom of the pile in the new, post-caste stratificatory system, but have not inherited matching ritual statuses recognized by the policy. (For example 50 per cent population below the poverty line (BPL,) do not belong to SC, ST categories)

## II

Critiquing structuralist theory, especially after Professor M.N. Srinivas himself pronounced death of the caste *system* and wrote its obituary in 1999 (few months before his sad demise), may appear like beating a dead horse. But considering the fact that (i) India's social policies still remain embedded in the principle of ritual hierarchy and (ii) that the terms of justification to claims of the upwardly mobile castes for the new democratic power and privileges continue to make sense to our policy markers, even for those communities which have ceased to be socially backward and have rendered for themselves ritual disabilities irrelevant for upward mobility, it seem, the dead horse is kicking hard!

The point however is not of holding an inquest on the death of caste! In fact, in the eyes of many a sociologist, not devoted to Redclif-Browinian structural-functionalism or the Dumontian ideological model of caste, the ideological and structural moorings of the ritual hierarchy greatly loosened in the decades following India's Independence—thanks to profound economic and political changes in the larger society (I.P. etal). These strands of research, however, were kept at the periphery by the then dominant structuralist discourse on caste. The issue really is about the prolonged non-recognition by the sociologists of the kind of transformations the caste system was undergoing and their implications for legitimizing the policies and the terms of political discourse concerning the issue of caste, and generally about the nature of social change in the post-Independent India.

To put differently, a much larger issue is involved: It is about freeing sociological imagination, and the method, from viewing social stratification in India, as a totally integrated, self-perpetuating synchronical whole which effects changes, on its own, within itself so that it can basically remain the same,—i.e. by changing shapes and functions of its elements, but retaining its intrinsic ideological and systemic character.

In what follows I shall briefly explicate three aspects of this theoretical perspective which, in my view, have, in their different ways stunted sociological research on stratification in India—by preventing (a) generation of new data, (b) refinement of analytical tools and procedures for studying contemporary formations and processes of social stratification in India.

#### 1 Sacral and power neutral conception of Social stratification (exclusion).

The structuralist theories do indeed account for the role economic and political power play in functioning of the ritual status system of caste. However, acquisition of such power by a lower ritual-status group, does not entitle it to a higher status in the social hierarchy. For example, for Dumont such (secular)

power is subsumed, subordinated and encompassed by the rituality principle. M.N. Srinivas however, recognizes acquisition of such power by lower castes as an important empirical phenomenon arisen (or accompanied by) modernity and democracy. In his view castes by acquiring such new power expand horizontal spaces for their social functioning—they even attain social dominance. But dominance does not qualify them to a higher status. To put it differently, theoretically, power earns status to a group only when its power is sacralized. Ritually unsanctified power is anomalous and lacks systemic legitimacy. The powerful, but ritually lower castes can of course earn ritual respect through sankritization, but not the actual status. Ofcourse, eventually, their power, in some cases, may even be legitimized by the system's sanctifying authorities. Such groups then may get admitted to a *dvija* category. Ironically the structuralist view of flexibility/mobility of the caste system resonates, in some strange ways, with the ideology and structure of the varana-jati system delineated in the scriptures (the *dharma sastras*), especially with the ideas pertaining to *jati-utkarsh* (upward mobility) and *jati apkarsh* (downward mobility) where transgressions of ritual codes lead to downward mobility and compliance to upward mobility.

Interestingly, the structuralists began to admit, sometime in the late 1980's, that ritual status had ceased to be an important consideration in determination of social status of groups and individuals. Such recognition however came not because new data had come to light. It, infact, came through politics—the politics of opposing implementation of the Mandal Commission Report. However, the modification of the theory itself,—i.e., acknowledging implosion of the ritual-hierarchy and relating it to the economic and political changes which took place in the post-Independent India—took a long time, over three decades. (Future of caste essay)

To conclude, the theory persisted with the sacral and power neutral view of social stratification in the face of rapid disintegration of the ideological and systemic bases of the caste-system. This, in effect stalled for long time theoretical and



empirical explorations in the Indian sociological research of relationships between principles and processes of social stratification and the economic and political changes in the society.

### **Orientation to history**

The structuralist view of caste as a perpetually synchronic and vertically-integrated system of hierarchy, informed and legitimated by a sense of religious morality '(values)' had little use for history.

It should therefore not surprise us that no significant attempt has been made to historically reconstruct (historicize) the institution of caste in India—i.e. producing, for example, the kind of accounts we have for slavery or the making of the working class. In short, history only rarely enters the structuralist theorization of castes.

The only exception has been B.R. Ambedkar who used historical sources to study caste and used that understanding effectively in his struggles against oppressions and humiliation inflicted in the ritual power hierarchy on those pushed and kept on the periphery of the ritual order. But Ambedkar despite his use of history for unraveling sociological issues of his time, he did not qualify himself to be admitted either to the caste of Historians or of the Sociologists.

For Indian sociologists either Sanskritic scriptural texts or the informant-oriented fieldwork (where informants were by and large the caste Hindus) constituted main sources for theorizing caste. The result was, the theory even if inadvertently, represented an ideological view of caste similar to the one propounded in the Sanskritic scriptures, and developed, defended and legitimized by the custodians of these scriptures over centuries. It is a known tendency that ideology abhors history and when required it creates its own history-retrospectively. One may indeed find an odd structural theorist of caste approaching history from such perspective. Usually the idea of using history is to illustrate the structural continuities in caste. (Shah) There indeed are some

credible efforts of some historians who have made us available historical tracts from the Buddhist, Jain, Charvak and Tantric literature, but these hardly ever entered the account of caste in the sociological literature. (D. Chattopadhyaya, R.S. Sharma, Uma Chakravarti)

If we take these sources into account caste will begin to look quite different from the established ideological view we are used to. For example when we visit Buddhist and Jain historical sources we do not get a sense of a varna system. There ofcourse are the Brahamans, kshatriyas and householders but the relationships are not depicted in terms of ritual hierarchy. The picture that emerges is more of guilds and communities. On the whole, if we take a historical view of caste, based both on taking into account the non-Brahmanic sources, caste would appear as a plurality of socio-political collectivities who continually struggled, strived, and competed for acquiring higher statuses in the society, even as they sought to maintain their different cultural identities.

The fact is that caste has been a politically and ideologically contested terrain from its inception in which hegemonic ideologies continued to be crafted and sought to be institutionalized by certain dominant social groups or communities ensuring for themselves higher social-ritual status. Such dominance, achieved by establishing a near monopoly of power and knowledge in the society has been constantly, resisted by the subjugated communities. Quite a few of these communities periodically, forcefully challenged the upper-caste dominance by producing counter-ideological discourses and often even forming political alliances among themselves. By mobilizing military support of their compatriots, leaders of such communities even managed to acquire power in form of kingship or generally by establishing membership to the 'class of rulers' (rajanyas/kshatriyas) In such moments of history when the hierarchies were shaken loose the lower-status, subjugated groups succeeded in moving upward in the ritual hierarchy demonstrating, in the process, the salience of the power-principle of caste over the status-principle.

To conclude, the ahistorical, structuralist view of caste is, ironically, marked by a kind of noncontemporaneity which has blinded the theory to the newly emerged macro structure of the national society which has brought to the Centre of social stratificatory processes.

### *Explaining untouchability*

The structuralist imperviousness to history has distorted the sociological understanding of untouchability as an abstract idea, a perpetual structural necessity to understand its opposite, the idea of purity. The untouchables and their problems did not constitute a legitimate area of sociological inquiry. It was seen as a social (not sociological) problem, best left to social-workers and politicians. At best, it was seen as a consequence of functioning of the system's principle of purity and pollution, continually causing ritual distances among its members. If one insists that the theorists must look at untouchables as a people, i.e., beyond their preoccupation with the abstract principle (invoking Ambedkar's division of labour vs. laborers) the response at best could be to view them as victims of collateral damage—unintended consequence of the system's efforts to retain its structural integrity and ideological values.

Strangely, it seems, the scholars were not prepared to fully work out implications of the purity-pollution principle when it came to explaining untouchability. In what follows I shall briefly elaborate these implications which, in my view have not been explored by the theory.

It is undeniable that untouchability is integral to Hindu ritual practices. It defines physical distances among individuals and groups in terms of purity and pollution. Such distances were indeed observed even within a family, between husband and wife and even between mother and child, for example, in the case of a menstruating woman. Some scholars mistakenly see such a practice of temporary and contextual 'untouchability' as comparable and qualitatively similar

to the practice of caste Hindus treating the entire group of people as untouchables for centuries.

In the case of untouchability of an untouchable caste, it is a permanently fixed attribute that is meant to be inherited from generation to generation. This untouchability has little to do with the physical cleanliness or uncleanliness of the so-called 'untouchability has little to do with the physical cleanliness or uncleanliness of so-called 'untouchables'. In their case, untouchability is treated as inhering in the bodies of untouchables. It is not the work they do which is defiling but what an untouchable did, became defiling. Whatever object he/she touched or on which cast a shadow of his body was considered and treated as untouchable. In this sense untouchability has been an extreme form of rituality [ritual practice]. Traditionally the arena of ritual practice was considered sacred and observance of ritual purity as endowing the practitioners with magical powers, and with pure bodies. Rituality, thus constituted its own sacred sphere and that space was monopolized, in different degrees, by the communities of dwijas (the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas) who were supposed, literally, to embody purity!

It seems that historically it was when observing ritual purity began to be associated with gaining of magical powers by its practitioners (roughly, the period of epistemic predominance of the Mimamsakas and Smritikaras) that the exclusion of the non-dwijas became institutionalized. (Ambedkar's: counter Revolution) Observing ritual purity and, consequently, untouchability acquired even a 'moral' justification a behavior that earned merit. Those among the sudras, considered the 'inassimilable' vanquished, e.g. the chandals of the ancient times, began to be despised, and treated as the outcaste and untouchable. Since then the numbers of 'untouchable' castes began to proliferate with the growing obsession of the dwijas with ritual purity. This resulted in attaching impurity to an increasing number of economic—productive and service—activities and occupations and their practitioners treated as 'polluting' *in their persons*. Several groups of people and individuals were not admitted into

(e.g. the chandals for resisting subjugation.) or were pushed out (e.g. groups of people who ate dog meat or skinned dead animals) of the caste system as a punishment for intransigence as well as for deviance and transgressions considered serious, and violative of the basic ritual codes of caste organization. In the creation of untouchability, the dimension of *rituality* was, thus, intertwined with that of *power*.

Thus seen Ambedkar was right to associate untouchability with the caste system. The point I wish to make in today's context is that the ritual aspect of caste having been extremely weakened, almost defunct, the practice of untouchability, which we witness today, has lost its traditional-ritual legitimation. It is used as an instrument of the powerful to subjugate the powerless. The conflict and violence we witness today on the issue of untouchability make greater theoretical sense when seen in terms of changing relations of power, than as reinforcement or assertion of any ritual practice associated with untouchability. The dominant castes often use 'untouchability' as a means to subjugate, even humiliate, the dalits, on the other hand, having recovered their self-respect and achieved a degree of well being thanks to the rights movements and the policies like reservation, resist and protest against the upper caste dominance. On the whole atrocities are committed on dalits by the upper castes particularly by those among them who have either acutely felt the loss of traditional social power or the castes who have been able to establish their dominance in villages, using their increased economic power and the political power of numbers./ All said, however, as far as dalits are concerned it cannot be denied that some elements of rituality still survive in their relation to the savarna castes. Among the non-dalit castes, however, ritual hierarchy has by and large collapsed.

## The New Stratificatory System

The structure of stratification that has emerged in India, especially after independence, is in many ways quite different. The new stratificatory system has acquired a pan-Indian macro structure, which is radically different from the local ritual-hierarchy based caste structure. The macro structure of caste, if it had one, was more like a theoretical reference, a conceptual scheme used for identifying the mobile and migrant communities of different castes in general terms of ritual status, so that some sense could be made of their place in the new local hierarchy they enter as migrants. This was the scheme of varna categories. Whereas the stratificatory system that has emerged after Independence has acquired a structural character at the national-society level. This is, firstly because the social policies of the Indian state have institutionalized new, nationally relevant demographic categories: the Scheduled Castes (SC) the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC). These are essentially non-ritual and non-hierarchical groupings which have now acquired strong political-cultural content and social-structural characteristics. Secondly because, for over last fifty to sixty years, a national economy and market have grown in India in the course of economic planning by the state. Lately with the freeing of markets from the state control, the process of structural delinking of the national economy from the caste economy—characterized by the *jajmani* system, hereditary occupations and local systems of food production and distribution—is now complete. At the national and regional levels castes have entered a new political economy of the modern nation–state. In this process, caste is fast losing its identification in ritual status terms. Castes which functioned primarily as units of a vertical system of local hierarchies of ritual statuses have been transformed into larger social-cultural conglomerates and ethnic type formations, each representing commonality of political interest. These new formations occupy spaces at regional and national levels and cannot be identified in old caste-status terms. They will have to be identified in new social and political-cultural terms. I mean, they would make little sense if one attempts to identify or classify them in ritual hierarchical terms. This is why the survey researchers and the social analysts face unsurmountable problem [in fact they get into an irrelevant and infructious exercise] of codifying and classifying castes today in ritual hierarchy terms [as

'upper' 'lower' etc.]. In fact such expressions as 'high castes' and 'low castes' have lost meaning. This is why they are often prefixed with terms such as backward, forwards, non-backward, dominant or poor, middle class and rich.

Most interestingly the means, avenues and even aspirations for upward mobility in the society as well as the reasons for downward social mobility of individuals and groups have fundamentally changed with the collapse of the ritual hierarchy. No one can rise or fall in status today `by adopting or discarding virtues of rituality or attributes of ritual status. For example, in the new stratificatory system, sanskritization has lost relevance. People at the lower rungs of hierarchy no longer care to adopt Brahmanic or upper caste ritualistic behavior or symbols for upward mobility. Today they rather emulate the economic and consumerist life styles of the upper classes. This is because economic and political power, rather than the ritual status, is a surer means for upward mobility. With loss of economic power many an upper caste people have experienced downward mobility, despite their higher ritual status. In the caste system aspirations of different castes were conditioned and structured differently. Today people of all castes and communities have common aspirations and they are all related to economic (consumerist) life style. It is another matter that some can and some can't realize these. But in this process, social mobility is increasingly becoming an individual pursuit than a collective group pursuit. Of course individuals use group- collective politics, but that as a means to individual end of achieving 'higher' status in the society. A large part of caste-politics is thus related to individual aspirations of the members of the lower castes to enter the middle class. This is why leaders of several lower castes pursuing upper class life styles are often blamed as deserters of the cause of their castes or as those who have been 'co-opted' or 'sold out'. One hears such complaints more frequently in respect of dalit and tribal elites pursuing improvements in their economic and social status.

So you have today a stratificatory system in which the central category is the middle class. It is a new middle class and not the one of pre-independence period, which was a euphemism for a conglomerate of upper castes [the dwijas]. In reality also members of upper castes had almost exclusive access to modern education, professions and even

politics. Even as late as the mid 1960's about 70 to 80 percent members of the higher civil services and the managers in public and private sector companies belonged to the upper castes. Today over 50 percent of the middle class according to the CSDS surveys come from the non-upper [the non-dwija] castes.

### **Reformulating the theory of Caste:**

To conclude, the real failure of the structuralist/comparative theory of caste is its inability to recognize and make sense of categories of new stratification. Since the new categories carry the tails of caste they are seen as extantions or reincarnations of the caste system. To put differently, the new forms of exclusion, because they conflate with caste, they do not make any sense to the conventional status theorist. This is perhaps because the new realities of social exclusion, do not easily fit the theory's binary categories of data analysis such as caste *versus* equality and the traditional (South Asian) *versus* modern (Western) society, an extreme form of status disability, continuing from the past. The theory fails to recognize that status-disability of a caste is structurally linked to its collective-power deficiency, and that remedying exclusion is not (and really never was) primarily a (social) question of improving ritual status, e.g. through sanskritization. The issue of status mobility is, and has always been chiefly a political question, i.e., the one of redefining power-relations.

In sum, the contemporary forms of social exclusion could be understood only if the conventional status theory is modified, expanded and transformed by taking account of insights generated by some *recent* (as well as some earlier ones neglected by the structuralists) *theoretical and empirical-historical* researches. I have in mind in contributions of Morton Klass, 1980, I.P. Desai 1988, Murray Milner 1994, Survira Jaiswal, 1998, Declan Quigley, 1999, Suzan Byley, 1999, Nicholas Dirks Hocart. These contributions enable us to view *political power as a constitutive principle* of caste, counteracting and constantly seeking to undermine its other principle, i.e., status. (Excavating Hocart)



In light of the above I shall now formulate a political-theory definition of caste.

### ***Political Theoretical Definition of Caste***

By balancing the so far overemphasized principle of (ritual) status with that of (political) power, caste can be more concretely conceptualized, firstly, as the institution that has been structuring and maintaining, for centuries, *relations of power* among different *communities*. As such, it seeks to legitimize these power relations: (a) through systematically dispensing various mixes of economic and cultural assets/opportunities *and* deprivations to different communities and (b) through endowing religious/ideological sanctification of such dispensations. Secondly, being primarily a power system its sacralization and the elaborate mechanisms of rewards *and* punishments it evolved, did not and could not succeed in substantially and permanently incorporating or recasting the cultural and historical identities of different communities in terms of hierarchical relations.

In sum, if we were to grasp the special nature of exclusion in India arising from a peculiar fusion of past processes of status-allocation and power-distribution and the contemporary process of modernity and democracy caste appears as a sacralized *power structure*—rather than an all-time, ideologically (religiously) determined hierarchy of ritual statuses.