In Search of a New Vocabulary:
A *Preliminary* Note on Caste and its Emerging '*System*'

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Anthropologists do not usually demand ... exacting standards and will settle to regard as adequate whatever can yield promising explanations at any given time. But if we can be more liberal in our judgments of adequacy, we should also be more conscientious in appraising our kit of conceptual tools. All too often concepts come burdened with the connotations and implications of the past contexts that gave rise to them. Hence a periodic review of our stock of ideas is neither an exercise in antiquarian nostalgia, nor a ritual occasion for rattling the bones of our ancestors. It should be, rather, a critical evaluation of the ways we pose and answer questions, and of the limitations we might bring to that task.

Eric R Wolf (1988:753)

Little doubt exists that the nexus between self and society historically in India was mediated by the caste system. Or, at least that is how most texts on Indian society and on caste system have averred over the decades. This nexus was perceived to be so strong that almost all historians and students of Indian society tended to define Indian society to be a caste society, and that without a caste lens it would be futile to understand it. One scholar concerned with the future of Indian caste system to be bleak summed up the then centrality of caste thus 'Man was made for caste and not caste for man' (Woodburne 1922:531). The decades prior to this assertion and much more ambitiously since then – coinciding with the rise of nationalist struggle and the reward of National independence - there prevailed a vision of caste-less society. Although Woodburne in 1922 and many more prior to him had expected modernity to hand a death-knell to caste system, it took nearly eight decades for an eminent Indian sociologist M N Srinivas to observe the death of the system. In an obituary on the caste system he wrote in 2003 lamenting on a paradox: *while caste as a system is dead or dying, individual castes are thriving* (Srinivas 2003: 459).

The quote above by Wolf is relevant quite significantly for the students of caste and its place in contemporary Indian society. Even though there has been sufficient evidence to argue the decline – if not death – of the system of caste, there continues a discussion of caste as though it is still a part of a system not unfree from its original existence. To a large extent this unchanging perception of an unchanging caste – with or without a system in recent decades is due at least two reasons. The first is the publication of a very influential work (and its availability in English translation) by Louis

Dumont in 1970 (*Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*), and the second was the implementation of the recommendations of the Second Backward Class Commission popularly known as Mandal Commission. Although the recommendations was during the mid 1990s, nearly two decades after the publication of Dumont's work, caste as a theme continued to dominate the imagination of Indian sociologists, social anthropologists and political scientists alike either in support or opposition to the recommendations. Dumont's work itself had contributed substantially in this regard (see, e.g., Natarajan 2005) which had prevented the recognition of the importance of several secular factors that undermine the role of caste in modern Indian society. Instead, it has been argued (e.g., Appadurai 1992; Berreman 1979; Beteille 1979; Dirks 1987; Gupta 2000; Quigley 1993; and Raheja 1988) that the Dumontian approach had led to a continuation of explaining caste as a cultural phenomenon bereft of any material content, or a dissent to the hegemony of the so called high caste (Karanth 2004). Ironically literature and theorization continued to proceed as if the single hierarchy of caste based on the notions of purity and pollution had remained intact even as notions of purity and pollution had begun to lose ground as a basis for caste relations.

The purpose of this note is mainly to make a few points, which I do hope to develop into a full fledged argument in the coming months. Many of these are well known, yet little attention has been paid by sociologists and social anthropologists especially from the subcontinent to 'codify' into a proper theoretical statement. The persistence of castes even after the death of a system needs an understanding. The emergent 'system' may not be an alternate to what is said to have been dead, but it is necessary to bring together the prevailing knowledge about caste and arrive at 'patterns' governing intra and inter-caste peculiarities. I do not make a claim that this paper will succeed in codification of the prevailing empirical knowledge on caste in India in the modern times, but it is an invitation to such an effort. In this direction, the following proceeds to make a few postulates

Redundancy of a 'Definition': Students of Indian society, especially those looking at the caste system continue to read the persisting definitions of caste (system) as endogamous groups that are localised, usually with an association with a hereditary occupation, and groups that are hierarchically arranged based on notions of purity and pollution, and with restrictions on inter-caste dining.

Nearly all these features of castes have become redundant in recent years. For a few years in recent decades we tended to uphold that the changes were much more rapid in the south of India than in the north, or more pervasive in the urban than in the rural parts of the country. In two essays that I had an opportunity to write nearly a decade ago, I had averred that the changes were much more evident in urban while in rural India the resilience was much stronger. Based on the more recent (field) studies in which I have been involved[1] and on my knowledge of the studies that have been undertaken in many research institutions, it may be argued that these features are

disappearing in more or less in the same pace as in urban areas too. Indeed, social and economic analysis of the decline in Indian agriculture is attributed also to unavailability of labour. Persons who had been historically associated with hard and menial labour are no longer available to work. Better work or livelihood opportunities had been influencing the levels of aspirations of worker – usually from the so called low castes – deter them from opting to work as agricultural labourers. The traditional and customary inter-caste service relations under the system of *jajamani* relations have more or less disappeared.

Restrictions are inter-caste dining seem to be increasingly a matter of the past than in contemporary times. Even though within the village there may be a practice of 'avoidance' of a high caste person eating the food cooked or served by a so-called low caste, there is a greater frequency of violation of this 'norm' than ever before. Indeed, it is not merely a breaking of inter-caste dining restrictions but the open acceptance of what a person on one caste now eats as food in contrast to the practices traditionally prevalent in the caste. Of particular significance is the practice of persons eating meat or chicken, if not beef even though traditionally the caste had restrictions on consuming such food items referred to as "non-vegetarian." Food habits are no longer a fool-proof indication of caste status. When such is the emerging pattern, restrictions on inter-caste dining too is fast becoming a matter of past.

Eating places varyingly referred to as 'Hotels', coffee- or tea-shops, 'dhabhas' etc, are a common sight lately in nearly all villages and towns. Their patronage by the members of all castes - high or low – is a major change while a decade ago in many villages it was considered unacceptable for many so-called high castes to take their custom to such establishments. That these establishments practiced open or concealed Untouchability by excluding the very low and former Untouchable castes, but gradually there have been open up to all castes. These institutions have been a major source of influence in breaking down the barriers of inter-caste dining.

Household help – also referred to as housemaids or made servants both in urban and rural areas have been a major source of change in rendering the taboos (on intercaste food consumption) redundant. Not only has there been a growing pace of 'social mobility', rising aspirations among the so called lower castes who have been traditionally such workers, but also the increased demand and declining supply of such 'servants' has led to this change. This does not, however, mean to say that such a radical change has been inclusive of the Dalits throughout the country.

Another feature of caste 'system' which has shown signs of rapid change while remaining resilient in many respects is the norm of caste endogamy (Banerjee *et al. 2009)*. While one hears much more frequently of the instances of inter-caste marriages – especially in urban parts of the country, there is also reasons to believe that society has generally become much more tolerant of

such marriages that it had been a decade or two earlier. Yet, the emerging institutions of marriage match making (including web-portals such as *shaadi.com or matrimony.com,* or the conventional news paper advertisements) have separate links or sections to cater to alliance seekers amongst specific castes. Even as there are preferences for ones caste (and specifications for stars and other horoscopic particulars) one finds ample number of examples also of advertisements empatically stating "caste no bar" as a criteria for mate selection.

I am aware that much of the changes described above give a picture as though they have been uniform across all the castes and nearly throughout the country. I should hasten to add that the process has not been that positive in being inclusive of the very low castes and the ex-Untouchable castes. Examining the manner in which the Dalits were being discriminated against in the face of a Tsunami a few years ago in South India, Hugo Gorringe summed up the national shame: *the template against which the post-colonial state imagined the Indian 'nation' was one that excluded marginalised sections of the population* (2008:123). Desai and Kulkarni (2008) come to a similar conclusion following an examination of the data in relation to education and affirmative action in Inda. They find that while the gap between Dalits and the rest of Indian society has declined in respect of primary education, the gap has widened when it comes to higher education. "Although the situation is improving, at each educational level, Dalits and adivasis continue to lag behind upper caste Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs, and these disadvantages seem to accumulate at higher levels of education" (Desai and Kulkarni 2008:266).

In the light of such a duality in the process of social change involving caste, one may venture a postulate that needs to be analysed much more carefully: There seems to be at least two forces at play in the context of caste and India's march to being a global society. *Persistence of old 'hierarchical principles' accompanied by discrimination and denial of a rightful share of that which goes with modern education, employment and economic mobility amongst the Dalits, while there seems to be a much more liberal social change involving the rest.*

Caste in Everyday Life

It is yet to be codified as to how far caste as an institution, a source of identity plays a role in our day-to-day life. Fieldwork in rural parts of Karnataka, parts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra suggest to me that this role has been reduced to a mere identity in itself than in relation to others. In this regards, it is appropriate to recall the contents of a paper that a colleague of mine and I wrote recently: 'People as they Perceive Themselves: In Pursuit of a 'Truly' Participative Research.' As part of a participative research on changing rural livelihood system and management of natural resources, we were engaged in a PRA with a group of people. The need to seek views on people, as they perceive themselves became evident when we asked a group of people to describe and classify the households in the village and one of its hamlets, as part of a PRA exercise. Our purpose was to

assess the variation among people in regard to the use and maintenance of common pool resources: the village wood lot, tanks and ponds, and the grazing lands. Our initial invitation to them was to carry out a 'social mapping' of the households in terms of either landownership or castes, indicating those who use them and contribute voluntary labour for their upkeep. Although the village is multi-caste in its composition, there were two numerically dominant castes, the Kapu-Reddys and Bheri Vaishyas, besides many other service castes, which had tended to become autonomous of each other in the recent decades. The nature of inter-dependence between castes, significant under the rubric similar to the pan Indian *Jajmani* system, locally called *Marey,* had been disappearing; replaced by a market determined exchange of goods and services. Even though ownership of land was an important factor in differentiating people in terms of wealth, there had been market links that had enabled people to eke out a livelihood pattern not entirely dependent on land, at least the extent of land owned. Thus, there were households that owned less than an acre of land in the tank's command area whose dependence on the common pool resources was quite distinct in pattern than those who may have owned, say more than ten acres of land and yet be as dependent, or otherwise on the resources as compared with a small or marginal farmer. This had been our approach to the understanding of the resource use pattern.

The group of people who were taking part in the PRA exercise was of the view clearly that neither caste nor extent of land owned could explain the variation in the use pattern and contribution to the management of the common resources. Instead they argued that the nature and extent of their involvement and dependence on the market made a crucial difference. The group identified six categories into which they the households in the village/hamlet could be classified. The criteria used by them could be related to a blend of conventional academic categories such as landownership, caste, status and other factors with their own conceptions of how households carried on a livelihood. But this was the people's categorization and, not expressed purely in caste terms.

I) Little to sell or buy
II) Sell less, buy more
III) Sell more, buy less
IV) Buy to Sell
V) Resource poor: buy all
VI) Resource rich: buy more

The important features to be noted in this scheme of classification of people by themselves are:

a) None of them is exclusive to any caste, instead cuts across different castes
b) The scheme has no hierarchy in it, and

c) The scheme is based more on material basis of everyday life and the link people have with the market

From a sociological point of view what is to be noted is that caste was not an important determinant of people's existence. As such, the observation of everyday social life offered very little that could be attributed to caste, caste system, or for that matter even religion. The one listed above certainly marks a variation to what Pandian (1983) noted as the tendency for people to identify themselves[2].

> if a person is asked a question about his caste identity, he may give one of several replies: 1) his caste name, which is not shared by other castes but may be shared by the subcastes of his caste; 2) his caste title(s),which may be shared by other castes and which could also be the caste name of some other caste; or 3) the varna category (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisiya and Shudra) with - in which he includes his caste (1983:190).

This system of new classification is similar also to what people tend to do more frequently, in terms of what the state defines them: BC, OBC, Group A, or B or C, as the case may be in relation to the manner in which the respective state Backward Class Commissions have classified castes and religious groups. Thus, if people do not identify themselves any more as castes as they did a few years ago, they may now be doing so as the state sees them, or as they find themselves in market led everyday life. The boundaries between them tend to flexible, with shifting solidarities. Perhaps, such new schemes of recognising oneself may simplify life as James Scott would (Scott 1998 cited in de Zwart 2005:159). Castes in the absence of hierarchies have tended to 'broad-base' themselves (Karanth 1998) by amalgamating with several other castes with similar cultural traits. In relation to the state, they have tended to become units of self-labelling entitites in the more recent times, somewhat similar to what Fenton (2003: 70-71) refers to as 'circumstantial ethnicities' or as Safran (2008) refers to as *ethnonyms*.

> 'Ethnonyms are not merely sociological categories or taxonomies; the label attached by a categoric group to itself, is often an indication of that group's position in a given society and may be a harbinger of what it can expect in the future.... Ethnic self-labeling may be a reflection of a group's positive or negative image of itself; or it may be reactive insofar as it responds to the challenge created by others (Safran 2008:438).

India, during he past three decades have been a witness several of such self labelling identities: Dalits, Bahujan, 'Ahinda' etc.

To Sum Up: In this note I have made an effort to list out some of the major changes in the basic features of caste as an institution. Some of these changes are so basic in nature that one cannot carry on defining caste any more as it has been done for the past hundred years or more. Given the widely ranging changes in caste – let alone the demise of the *system* of castes, the note calls for

developing a new sociological vocabulary such any description, analysis or theorisation is keeping the phenomenon as it operates in contemporary society than in terms of what it did a few decades ago. I shall conclude this note by drawing upon a statement by Andre Beteille in 2008: 'While there is clear evidence that caste is maintaining and perhaps even strengthening its hold over certain areas of life, there is also fairly convincing evidence of a steady decline of its hold over several other areas of it' (Beteille 1008: 3)

What is, however, needed is for sociologists and social anthropologists to take stock of these changes and persistence; areas of strengthening caste's hold and areas of its decline.

[1] Some of the studies that form the basis of what is being put forth here are as under:

(2009) Impact of NGO Work on Child Labour in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. An Evaluation of the Support by Child Rights and You (CRY) for Eradication of Child Labour in the Southern States. New Delhi: CRY

(2007) Bonded Child Labour in Silk Industry in Karnataka. [A study sponsored by the National Human Rights Commission. Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change. [Co-authors: Rajasekhar D., Gayathri Devi K G, and S Madheswaran]

(2006) Design and Management of Social Security Benefits for Unorganized Workers in Karnataka. New Delhi: *GTZ* – German Technical Cooperation; and Bangalore: Government of Karnataka. [Co-authors: Rajasekhar D., Suchitra J Y., and S Madheswaran]

(2005) At Loggerheads or Towards Sustainability? Changing Rural Livelihoods and Management of Natural Resources. *Social and Economic Change Monograph Series No.9*. Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change. (Co-author with V. Ramaswamy)

(2000a) The Threshing Floor Disappears: Rural Livelihood System in Transition. ETH-NADEL, Zurich and ISEC, Bangalore. (Co-author with V. Ramaswamy and Ruedi Hogger)

(2000b) From 'Marey' to Market: Changing Faces of Rural Livelihood System. ETH-NADEL, Zurich and ISEC, Bangalore. (Co-author: V. Ramaswamy)

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