

FROM HIERARCHY TO INEQUALITY; FROM A SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS BASED ON CASTE TO ONE ON CLASS

(some notes for discussion)

Caste identities have not withered away and in some respects they have even gained in strength. In his introductory paper to our Simla workshop, Jim Manor has rightly pointed out that caste has come to denote difference rather than hierarchy. A shift has come about in a social structure which was based on verticality to one of horizontality. Caste in the hierarchical setting was inclusive to the extent that the social ranks from top to bottom defined their roles and lived up to their ascribed status in ritualized interaction with each other, a system of exchange framed in the *jajman-kamin* relationship.

In reflecting on the fading away of the caste system in its hierarchical *avatar* it would be relevant also to summarily discuss when and how the principle of verticality came about. The setting of the caste order was an agrarian mode of production which evolved over thousands of years on the South Asian subcontinent. The peasant society which emerged was a frontier society incorporating tribal communities into the caste fold and into the early state formations which triggered the inclusion of tribal categories into sedentary agriculture. It was not a one-way type of development from tribe to caste. Periods of expansion alternated with periods of contraction and, supposedly, moving away from becoming entrapped in the caste ranking of the time. Thus fluidity and ambiguity have been major features of the change process in the political economy resulting in a caste order which started to lose its hybrid and syncretic character only under late-colonial rule. The village and the wider vicinity around it became, as G. Shah has argued in his contribution, the main context in which the network of caste relationships operated. When interaction was no longer locally bounded and agriculture became organized along capitalist lines of production, the hierarchical features backing up the caste order increasingly became increasingly inoperative. The drift from verticality to horizontality began already in the late nineteenth century and continued throughout the twentieth century. It meant that the ideas of natural domination and inferiority were never internalized in the worldview of the subordinated categories.

The caste order grew in rigidity at the top and bottom but it did not become less opaque than before in the broad intermediate zones. However, the idea of pollution remained fixed for the castes at the bottom of the heap. It did not lose its hold in the occupational restructuring which marked the transition from a traditional to a modern economy in which criteria of

ascription gradually made way for those of achievement. While superiority is not any longer acknowledged and inferiority has not become internalized but is now openly contested, the social system has graduated from one based on hierarchy to one structured on inequality. Both caste and class have remained organizing principles of social ranking as they were also in the past but in the new political and economic regime the latter principle has grown into overriding importance. In his Presidential Address delivered at the annual conference of the Indian Association of Labour Economics, held in Lucknow in 2010, K.P. Kannan has brought out the significance of the caste-class nexus in the production and reproduction of social inequality. The class dimension was, of course, not missing in the caste order of the past, but in the transformation to the capitalist mode of production economic status, concretized in terms of power and property, has gained in prominence while ritual status has receded in the attribution of positions within the system of social stratification.

The rigidity of the late-colonial caste order, made legitimate by colonial state makers, was gradually replaced by a more open type of class regime distinguished by a higher degree of upward and downward mobility in the intermediate zones between the polar ends of the social order. It would be difficult to overstate the role of political democracy in changing the caste balance after Independence. In the course of my fieldwork in Gujarat conducted from the early 1960s onwards I had to listen time and again to the complaints of the big landowners, members of the dominant castes. They never got tired of telling me how the founding fathers of the nation had erred in granting the right to vote to the landless underclass which had remained without voice and agency until then. Initially it seemed that growing assertion and pressure from below would not take long to materialize. This was the short episode of state-directed policies, made manifest in the built-up of a large public sector and with the government as mediator between the interests of labour and capital. That model of development was already abandoned a few decades later never having delivered what it promised. Consequently, the very substantial segments of the population deprived of power and property, have by and large remained stuck at the bottom of the economy and society. The changing system of ranking – from high versus low to more versus less - has resulted in an increase of social distance, an extension in scale of operation and a lengthening of the chain of inequality. Polarization rather than growing equality is the driving force in what has emerged as a predatory regime of capitalism flourishing under a free market doctrine. The bottom classes are dependent for their livelihood on the sale of their labour power on terms of employment distinctive for the informal economy, i.e. low and piecemeal wages close to

survival level, not regular but casual jobs, unskilled rather than skilled work, no social provisions or protection and absence of representation. A widening class divide and sustained poverty bordering over into acute pauperism are the outcome of this economic regime.

Social consciousness is slow in awakening. The space for collective action is lacking and the footloose nature of the workforce, kept in a state of circulation, prevents the mobilization of working class solidarity. The compulsion to maneuvering around a labour market, in which supply is in excess of demand, explains why primordial loyalties, ties of caste in particular, have to be articulated in order to qualify for a job or find access to shelter. As the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganized Economy (NCEUS) has concluded in its series of reports, economic policies are biased in favour of making capital more productive and more profitable, while neglecting or even victimizing the interests of the labouring poor. The politics and policies followed are those of exclusion, not amended and moderated by a lurking suspicion that the excluded masses might rise in revolt and upset the established order. The fear of *the dangerous class* which in the West became a major motive in the drive towards inclusion at the end of the nineteenth century is simply not a concern of the contemporary Indian elite. That disregard may have to do with the assumption of the natural inferiority *per se* of the working poor but it could also be caused by the informalized character of the economy which puts a premium not only on cheap labour but also on the infinite fragmentation and segmentation of the workforce.

The emancipation of labour rights in the West from the late-nineteenth century onwards which led to the inclusion of the poor classes into mainstream society, as described and analysed by De Swaan, was the outcome of 'the great transformation' which restructured agrarian-rural societies and economies into industrial-urban ones (Polanyi 1944). For many decades now and also in the current era of globalization the dominant development paradigm has been that the un/underdeveloped economies and societies would follow in the footsteps of the nations which completed in an earlier round *the great transformation*. However, that transition does not seem to be the trajectory in which the late-comers, the majority of mankind, is involved. What were agrarian economies have become post-agrarian economies, not industrial ones. And what were rural societies, in which the majority of the population stayed village inhabitants, are indeed in the process of becoming urban ones but quite slowly and reluctantly so. No doubt, the exodus from the countryside is in full swing and in today's India an army of close to one hundred million men, women and children have become

footloose for shorter or longer spells of time. However, many of them do not migrate but circulate, i.e. they leave from where they come without succeeding in settling down to where they go. Sooner or later most of them have to return to their place of departure. The rural poor are admitted to the urban domain to work, if and only as long as their presence is required, but not to live and settle down as citizens. According to A. Kundu urbanization has decelerated from the early 1960s onwards. In a recent commentary he has labelled the trend to keep the poor out of the metropolitan growth poles as a form of 'exclusionary urbanization' (Kundu, EPW, vol.XLVI/20, 14 May 2011: 10-12).

The development trajectory on which De Swaan built his notion of social consciousness was marked by a fundamental change from exclusion to inclusion. Although the politicians and policymakers in India insist that they have not abandoned this mission, their notion of inclusion is that it will come later rather than sooner in accordance with the trickle down concept which says that economic growth has to remain prioritized as long as it takes, i.e. until there is 'enough' surplus accumulated, to also afford a share to the poor. The welfare state which came about in the West had another scenario as also told by Tony Judt in a retrospective narrative (2010) *Ill fares the land* (note: *where wealth accumulates and men decay*). Actually, a welfare state for the world at large is scorned at by the powers that be who are strict disciples of a free market and insist on the code of neoliberalism. But also in the West the welfare state has not become the end product it promised to be in terms of the political, economic and social order. The ideology of equality which was the driving force has also waned in the part of the world where it emerged. What we are subjected to in the setting of Europe is a progressive trend towards inequality. Politics and policies of exclusion are specifically targeting the ethnic minorities and that drive is backed up by a major segment of mainstream society. Rather than the West following the Rest, the dynamics are the other way round. It is in that wider perspective of globalization that we also have to understand the tenacity with which the caste system as a social order founded on inequality is kept intact.

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2011-05.30

