

In what ways does caste differ from class as a form of social hierarchy?

This essay intends to explore the ideas of what 'caste' and 'class' are, and the role each of them has in constructing and maintaining societies.

The area of study is one of such importance and interest because the two forms of hierarchy have come to epitomise the contrasting views held about how societies in different parts of the world function; class being generalised to be associated with Western societies, and caste specifically being associated with India – indeed, caste has become “a central symbol for India” (Dirks 2001: 3).

While there are clear fundamental differences between the two, there are cases where the boundaries may be less clear, the greatest example of this in practice being how the two forms of hierarchy interact in modern India.

The essay will initially discuss the explicit ways in which class differs from caste seen in its traditional form, in order to draw a clear line between the two, before moving on to discuss how contemporary India manages to accommodate both forms of hierarchy, emphasising the complications that arise when two forms of social order battle for power.

We will begin by making clear the most fundamental, underlying difference between the two forms of hierarchy, a difference of immense importance as it has always been the initial way of identifying the two.

Caste has always been directly linked with the Hindu religion and exists in the form of an ancient hierarchy based on the notions of purity and pollution. In its simplest form, known as ~~Varna~~, the caste system is seen to exist of four groups, the purest being the ~~Shudra~~, followed by the ~~Untouchables~~, the ~~Vaisya~~ and the ~~S~~.

▲ fifth group, colonially known as the ~~untouchables~~, fall outside the rank. The hierarchy consists of a number of complex rituals related to purity that stem from the Brahmin, the priestly caste.

Class is seen to have no such religious basis. Due to its lack of such a specific root, it has been harder to define specifically, however possibly the most influential theory of class was that of Karl Marx, who distinguished between those who had 'capital' – i.e; a means of production, and those who did not, thus had to work for those with capital (Jayaraman 1981: 20). Such an idea is the basis of the modern ideas of upper, middle and lower class. In ~~Caste and Class~~, Jayaraman distinguishes between these ideas of Marx and those of Max Weber, who believed "people are ranked according to the amount of 'esteem' or 'prestige' they possess in society." (1981: 20).

While both views are expressed on different grounds, they seem to be very interlinked, the presumption being that those with this 'prestige' will be those in control of some form of capital – ensuring a high ranked position from both perspectives.

It is important to emphasise here that these descriptions of the basis of both systems are only brief do not intend to give a detailed understanding of their underlying workings – they simply intend to explain the primary distinctions between the two.

We will now move from these more general distinctions between class and caste to some more specific examples that highlight some of the different practices of the two systems, starting with one of the most well known examples, the practice of ~~endogamy~~.

The typical view is that endogamy plays a huge role in the caste system, while playing no part in the class system. While the former point will be shown to indeed be the case, the accuracy of the latter will be drawn into question.

The importance of caste endogamy stems from implications of caste separation, which in everyday life the majority of interactions should be kept within the caste – including

marital interactions. Dumont describes this process as 'endo-recruiting' where by a family group continually reproduces itself (1970: 112), and makes it clear that 'one is forbidden to marry outside' (1970: 112) this specific group.

The idea that endogamy could hold such a strong position in class based societies is ridiculous, however the idea that endogamy is absent in these societies is equally ridiculous. In fact it is very easy to picture the situation of the disgruntled father who discovers his well educated, high class daughter wishes to marry an uneducated, working class boy; indeed such situations are regular occurrences in popular culture (films, novels etc). Ghurye goes as far as saying that "British class system bear's remarkable likeness to the Indian caste system" [in terms of endogamy practices] (1961: 284).

Such a situation emphasises the blur that can occur between caste and class but does not seem to fit into an essay describing the ~~connections~~ differences between the two, however it is more important to consider the wider contexts of the two systems: endogamy in traditional caste is seen as a rigid system with great taboo against marriages between different castes, while in class systems, it seems more a case of personal preference: indeed in some situations non-endogamy is even romanticised.

Dumont's idea of 'endo-recruiting' has strong implications towards the importance of hereditary aspects in caste lifestyle, and this will form part of our next discussion.

The idea that a person inherits their parent's caste and continues in the family employment plays a big role in the caste hierarchy, a pressure (in the case of having to continue with the ~~family~~ ~~caste~~) that in general is absent from class systems.

Such properties led to Linton's distinction between the way a person may interact with the specific roles required of them in society – class being associated with 'achievement' and caste with 'ascription' (Described in: Gould 1990: 39). Gould explained this as meaning

you simply "either...inherit a status... or you 'acquire' them by more direct and personal initiatives" (1990: 39).

This means that the person living in a class based society has a great deal more freedom in choosing the direction their life takes. In fact, it suggests, that with enough determination and the required personal qualities, a person could reach great heights regardless of their background – something that surely would be viewed in a very positive light by most today.

In caste based societies, however, "there was very little scope for acquiring status outside" of it (Jayaraman 1981: 10). This highly restricts individuals, and can be linked to the fact that he "has certain obligations to the group of which he is a member by birth" (Beteille 1996: 160).

This stresses the importance of interdependence in caste based societies, the idea that the well being of the family unit is of greater importance than the individuals need. Such a view directly contrasts that of modern class societies, which emphasise the significance of independence, personal achievement, striving to be the best one can be regardless of any family issues.

▲According to Dumont, "the ideal of liberty and equality follows immediately from [this] conception of man as an individual" (1970: 11). This ideal is indeed one of the key ways class has been distinguished from caste, caste being labelled with 'inequality' and 'hierarchy' while class claiming to promote equality. The labels given to caste are hard to deny however arguably in many cases they apply to class too. It is true that class hierarchies give the opportunity for equal chances for all in some situations, however in

some this is far from the case, a well discussed example in modern society being Oxford University's conspicuous favouring of student from an elite public school background.¹

Therefore it seems the distinction between the two here is the way they are portrayed in popular culture, caste being viewed, in general accurately, as a system of inequality, while class being viewed, more inaccurately, as a system that emphasises equality.

~~Caste & Class in Contemporary India~~

The examples discussed thus far have been excellent examples of how class and caste differ in their traditional forms, as two separate entities acting independently of each other.

What they lack is any implications for how the two may differ when ~~the two economies~~ ~~recede~~, so to speak, and how they may blur into each other, and to a certain extent, overlap (Beteille 1991: 352).

We will therefore move on to discuss caste and class in the context of contemporary India, where "the two principles of social stratification (caste and class) compete and thereby dramatically reveal what are the essential properties of both" (Gould 1990: 68).

It would be impossible to pin-point an exact time where class began to have an influence in India, and the transition from a purely caste-based society to a society where caste and class interact is blurred. Liechty explains that in 1951, "while immersed in the social idiom of caste relations, residents of Kathmandu [capital city of Nepal] were fully acquainted with the experience and logic of class relations" (2003: 63).

Clearly they were not ignorant to the process of class; however, whether their reasons were religious or political, they still chose to use caste as opposed to this.

¹ Evidence taken from www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1466946.ece

▲ lot has of course changed in half a century, Beteille explaining that in modern India educated Indian's will deny the existence of caste, and emphasise the importance of focussing on the future rather than on the past (1996: 153).

How can this portray the differing aspects of caste and class 'in action', so to speak? We will now move on to some specific aspects of life where the two have clashed and the contradictions and complications that come with it.

Nothing emphasises these complications more than the shift in power that has taken place since the introduction of class in contemporary India.

If caste and class were to fit neatly together, one would presume that being part of a high caste would automatically result in high class membership, and vica versa. Being of a higher caste would mean a person would have more ties with colonialists, giving them a 'foot-in' to a strong position in the caste system. Such an idea is supported by Fernandes, who explained how the transition to an economic based class system "rested on a reworking of existing caste-based equalities" (2006: 7).

This situation did not apply to the whole of India however. Liechty argues that "while some caste elite successfully translate caste privilege into class privilege, other upper class families struggle in vain against the erosion of their traditional cultural capital in the face of a new 'democracy of goods'" (2003: 63). He provides evidence for this, if only anecdotal; from situations of low-caste taxi drivers earning a great deal more than high-caste government officials (2003: 63).

Despite this wage difference, however, typical class differences are still evident here; a 'high-class' government job and a 'low-class' taxi driver job. This does not detract from the point being made though – that the merging of two systems of social stratification was not clear cut and produced confusion.

The key to this confusion is that while caste may have provided a stepping stone for high class status; it was not the be-all and end-all: those from lower castes also stood a chance of class success; it may have just taken more work. Whilst caste was the only hierarchy operating, there would have been no chance for such an opportunity at all. This supports the idea discussed earlier about caste being based on ascription and class on achievement – as class became more important in India, the opportunity for personal achievement to overrule any caste ties of ascription grew.

With this transformation from ascription to achievement there were inevitable changes in people's priorities, indeed it became the case that "the obligation to one's occupation [existed] independently of the obligation to one's caste and to some extent [displaced] it" (Beteille 1996: 162).

Because the social world created by class cut across this world of caste to such an extent (1996: 174), being two systems that differ so much in their fundamental principles, it was impossible for both to prevail, and the general view in modern urban India is that if the country is to move forward, the professional world must take the class based route, rather than adhere with traditional caste values. Evidence for this proposition is that a number of Indian university places are reserved for those from low caste backgrounds in order to ensure the traditional system hinders modern students in no way. ²

Such an example would suggest that class in contemporary India has, at least in urban societies, become completely dominant over caste. We will quash this idea by returning to one of the biggest distinguishing factors of caste, discussed earlier in the essay: endogamy. Beteille describes "the man who declares himself passionately against caste

² Evidence taken from www.defeatpoverty.com/articles/With%20Reservations%20--%20Economist%2009-nov-07.pdf

in every form, but nonetheless opposes strenuously the marriage of his children outside his caste" (1996: 163).

How can one get away with such a self-contradictory view? Quite easily, simply by exploiting the very ways in which caste and class differ. Fuller explains that in order to hide from the true reasoning behind such a view: that of preventing the undermining of a purity based hierarchy; the man in question would turn to class and cultural based differences to defend his view, such as a different "~~the~~ ~~sch~~ (way of life)" (Fuller 1996: 12).

So in turning to distinctions of class, a more acceptable social hierarchy to caste in modern India, the man has ironically acted to preserve one of the few remaining caste rituals in the country.

It is however important to remember that while endogamy may still exist, intercaste marriages are becoming more and more common, and at least in urban India, the taboo that accompanies it is fading.

In conclusion, when taken in its traditional form, caste clearly contrasts class as a form of social hierarchy in a large number of ways, including marital practices, the importance of hereditary values, opportunities of achievement and conceptions of equality.

In contemporary India, where the two exist side by side, these differences can blur into one another; causing contradictions and confusion in the workings of social stratification. Ultimately though, such confusion can be broken down and explained by the fundamental differences between the two forms of hierarchy – as it is because of these differences that any confusion could ever arise in the first place.

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