

Caste: An Indian Manifestation of Social Inequality.

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Among the social organizations in the world caste system is one of the oldest and elaborate ones. This term 'Caste' has been employed all over although its correct meaning has not apparently been understood.

Its complexity is such that even among the theorists there is no agreement as to what it actually connotes. Some prefer to approach the institution from a cultural stand point, where as some others presume that caste can best be comprehended as a structural phenomenon.¹

The complexity is so intense that some have thought it preferable to adopt one approach as against another. Best example in this matter is Max Weber. Even he suffered from ambiguity, when he paid attention to this phenomenon. The shift of emphasis from the cultural to a structural stand point was quite apparent in him.²

Those who preceded him as for example Senart³ Risley⁴ Bougle⁵ preferred to emphasize the strange and uniqueness of the Hindu caste system and the way it varied from caste situation in other countries; Dumont⁶ demonstrated that caste is essentially a Hindu phenomenon based on a sense of hierarchy between the pure and impure. He desired to analyse caste as a cultural phenomenon.

Whatever may be the meaning, caste is generally regarded as the prototype of a system of rigid social inequality and it is both a form of social organization and a system of values.⁷ As a system of relations it is marked by a division of society into groups which are ranked in an elaborate hierarchy. As a system of values it is and the importance it assigns to the ideas of purity and pollution.

In its extreme form, one's caste position is ritually determined. This ritualistic influence perpetuates some times throughout his life. A person's caste association determines his entire disposition of life, his education, occupation, civic and political privileges, his marriage: choice of marriage partner, his associational membership and his ritualistic behaviour. Important choices in life are thus governed by his birth over which an individual has no choice. This inequality has been termed as 'institutionalized inequality'.

As a social institution, caste system has been elaborately discussed in Indian sociological and anthropological literature. These systematised studies on caste have become increasingly sophisticated through years. Several writers are of the opinion that caste or caste like groups are found even beyond India in such widely scattered areas as Arabia, Polynesia, Africa, Guatemala, Japan and the United States, particularly in its southern part.⁸

But inspite of this one can very well argue that caste system has no parallel in any other country. It appears that the caste system with its unique aspects is a peculiar feature of Indian social structure and the attributes associated caste as a rigid system of social stratification are not found elsewhere.

"In the land which cradled Hinduism, life and thought were shaped and dominated by caste. No wonder than that caste has been of interest to sociologists and Anthropologists throughout the Globe"⁹

Again,

"No comparable institution to be seen elsewhere has anything like the complexity, elaborateness and rigidity of caste in India".¹⁰

While analysing the etymology of the word caste it is understood that it comes from the Portuguese origin.

"The word 'caste' comes from the Portuguese word caste, signifying breed, race or kind, *homen de boe casta* is 'a man of good family'".¹¹

"The word caste- this is of Spanish and Portuguese origin"¹²

"The term 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word".¹³

Some sociologists pointed that this word, 'Castus' means 'pure'. But whatever may be the various senses of the word, its Indian application is from the Portuguese who had so applied it in the middle of the 15th Century.

"The current spelling of the word is after the French word 'caste' which appeared in 1740 in the 'Academies' and was hardly found before 1800. Before that time, it was spelt as 'cast' in the sense of race or breed of man. It was used as early as in 1555 A.D."¹⁴

Sirinivas also presented a descriptive analysis about caste. He examined the word caste and its relation with two other terms- Jati and Varna.

"The English word 'Caste' corresponds more or less closely to what is locally referred to as **Jati** or **Kulam**. In addition to **Jati** and **Kulam**.

Many of the villagers particularly the Brahmins are familiar with the concept of Varna. Although the terms **Jati** and Varna refer normally to different things the distinction is not

consistently maintained. Varna refers to one of the four main categories into which Hindu society is traditionally divided; Jati refers generally to group.¹⁵

However when we compare the words 'Varna' and Jati with the word caste, it is useful to examine some Sanskrit and Pali texts also. In this connection some sociologists argued that the word for caste used throughout the Sanskrit literature and also in Pali and Jain Prakrit literature was 'Jati'; sometimes very rarely the word 'Yoni' was used and at some places the word 'Kula'.

However in Sri Lanka and in other South East Asian countries the word Jati is not used. According to some sociologists, the word Jati was most often used as the Hindu synonym for caste. It has many meanings. Andre Beteille says that in his experience the word Jati may be used to refer to linguistic, regional and religious categories of persons.¹⁶ Even when the term Jati is used in caste context, Beteille states it may refer to a sub-caste category or to a caste association.

While analysing Varna it is not difficult to find out this term in the oldest literature. The Vedas mention sometimes two varnas. Sometimes three varnas. The two varnas are the Arya Varna and the Dasa Varna - the Arya class and the Dasa class. In this expression the new immigrant Aryas are contrasted to the old indigenous population, the Dasas.

More often the two varnas mentioned are Brahma (Brahmins) and Rajanya or Kshatra (Kshatriyas). Both these were mentioned within the Arya society. The third was called Vish, which means 'all' the 'multitude'. They were the commoners over whom the king ruled.

After the Aryans had conquered the non-Aryan masses, they were given a place which constituted the lowest Varna. They were called the Shudras occupying the lowest rank in the Varna system.

Thus we find that the word caste was related with various concepts like Jati, Kula and Varna. Among the Sinhalese, the terms used for caste are Jati and Kula. These terms are associated with birth. Terms such as 'Gedara', 'Vasagama', 'Variga' and 'Pelanti' are also used to identify the caste. (Yalman, 1960; Leach, 1961; Obeyesekere, 1976). These various terms have reference to the **Varna model** and should not be confused with 'Jati' in the Indian sense which is often applied to describe several endogamous sub-castes hierarchically organised within a regional and linguistic area (Yalman, 1968:87).

Although, as we have seen, there exists different shades of meanings of this word caste sociologists have used these terms to describe ranked groups of people within a rigid system of stratification.

Origin of caste

Considering the importance of caste as a social institution in India, it is no wonder that volumes have been

written about the factors influencing its genesis and growth. Various theories have been formulated to explain the origin of caste.¹⁷ Thus Senarat is of the opinion that a multiplicity of factors have gradually crystallised into the present form of caste. Some of the important factors are the emergence of the Aryans as conquerors, their concern to maintain purity, the rising power of the Brahmins, the doctrine of metempsychosis as determined by the law of Karma etc.¹⁸ There is also an elaborate explanation of the origin and subsequent diversification of caste groups in Hindu religious scriptures. According to this explanation, the Aryan Varna-system is the basic foundation of caste. Originally there were four Varnas with their specific duties. Various Jati groups emerged subsequently. **Manu** describes the origin and rise of Jati in the following manner. He starts with four Varnas as something given or primary and derives all castes as being due to mixtures of these pure Varnas. Let us take the letters Bb, Kk, Vv and Ss to stand for Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra males and females respectively. When a Brahmin man marries a woman from any of the three varnas there will be three castes (Bk Bv Bs). A Kshatriya marrying a woman of the two lower varnas will give two new castes (Kv and Ks) and similarly a Vaishya marrying a Shudra woman will give one more (Vs). So six caste emerge **by a man of a man** higher varna marrying a woman of a lower varna. Similarly, if a man of a lower varna marries a woman of a high varna, we shall have six more castes (Kb, Vb, Vb, Sb, Sk, Sv). The first type of marriage, though not favoured as the best practice, was, however, allowed as not being too bad and was called Anuloma marriage, i.e. marriage of a man of a higher status to a woman of a lower status. The second type of marriage was Pratiloma and was frowned upon. This system of marrying across caste is known as hypergamy. The status of the first six hybrid castes was higher than the second group of six castes. These twelve represented the first class. Thus, from four varnas by just two crossings one gets a total of 204 castes as follows:-

i) Anuloma and Pratiloma Castes after first crossing.	12
ii) Crossing of six anuloma castes among themselves	15
iii) The same with man and woman in the reverse order.	15
iv) Crossing of the original four varna with six Anuloma and six Pratiloma castes.	48
v) Crossing of six Pratiloma castes among themselves and with the four Varnas i.e. same as 234	78
vi) Inter crossing between the six Anuloma and six Pratiloma castes	36
Total :	204

This is how the origin of castes and other sub castes is explained in Manusmriti.¹⁹

Another theory which seeks to give a rational explanation for the origin of castes, holds that the caste originated in the Division of Labour or specialisation of various functions in society. This would immediately tend to take away the stigma of irrationality from the system and could explain the social disabilities of certain classes of people as arising from distortion of a system which was different in its pristine purity. This theory was founded by J. C. Herfield. In short he says that caste is mainly occupational in origin, i.e. people were first grouped into occupational guilds which in course of time solidified into castes.²⁰ Nesfield emphatically denies the racial origin of the caste system.

Risley basically accepts this theory and he shows an inseparable connection between caste and race in his three books, viz., *Anthropometric Data from Bengal* (1891), *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) and *the people of India* (1915). His theory is important for understanding the origin of caste from an anthropological point of view.

Risley's racial theory presupposes that, from the standpoint of physical or biological traits, human being can be divided into several groups or races.²¹ With regard to the relation between caste and Race, Risley has two important points. First, because caste divisions prohibit intermarriage and social connection caste society provides a vast laboratory as if to say, which can be studied from the anthropological point of view. Second, there is a broad correspondence in the Hindu society between the physical type and social grouping. The order of nasal index of different castes, as he says, corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence. The social and the physical aspects are related with each other.

Risley even draws a correlation between these physical traits and such cultural traits as matrimony, totemism and exogamy.²²

Ghurya modifies Risley's theory and accepts it only with some reservations. He holds the view that caste is mainly a product of race and hypergamy. The Indo Aryans first entered India in about 2500 B.C. The conquered aborigines were included within their caste-fold but the Aryans took all steps to keep their blood free from any intermixture.²⁴ Endogamy became the essential device to maintain such racial purity.

The lead in this respect was given by the Brahmins. And Ghurye maintains that this culture trait of the Indo-Aryans can be traced back to the Indo-Europeans who also cultivated the same exclusivist spirit in social relationship. How did this feeling of exclusiveness give birth to caste system? Ghurye clarifies that the Aryans, when they entered India, must have had among them three well-defined classes based on some loose functional corporations. Intermarriage among them was rare, though not forbidden. The Shudras were different from them and

they came from the conquered people. This only explains why all the three varnas are the twice borns whereas the Shudras are known as the single-born. The Shudras were strictly separated from others and various types of disabilities and inhibitions were imposed on them. In Northern India there is some leniency shown but the Brahmins towards other twice born castes. But in South India, the Brahmins settled alone and they applied their rules relating to the Shudras to all the indigenous people of the South. Like Slater and N. K. Dutt, Ghurye holds that the South Indian people, before their contact with the Indo-Aryans, shared the ideas of primitive people about the power of food to transmit certain qualities.²⁵ That is why, the restrictions on food and drink are so rigorous in South India.

The Brahmins in this way became the sole 'guardian' of this society. Because of the superior image of the Brahmins, all other groups tried to follow the Brahmanical practices. Group solidarity and group prestige enabled all of them to close their ranks. Thus what was earlier initiated by the Brahmin as a device to maintain their racial purity was subsequently followed by other groups. These groups also became endogamous.

These diverse groups became crystallised in castes when occupational groups were created with the increase of functional differentiation in society. During the Rigvedic time, even Priesthood was not hereditary. Subsequently, community of interest among persons following the same craft gave rise to a corporate organisation and technical skill was passed on from father to son.²⁶ Ghurye thus concludes that caste is a Brahmanic child.²⁷

Irawati Karve does not accept Ghurye's theory. She says "The pre-Aryan Jati-system and the Aryan Varna system have been interwoven together to form a very elaborate ranking system."²⁸ She holds that most of the caste-clusters are to be found among the Shudras which proves that the Aryan Varna system was imposed upon an already existing jati-system.

Louis Dumont too analysed the origin of caste system. He makes the system almost the natural order of things for the Indians. His point of departure is directed to Bougle's following observation:

"The spirit of caste unites these three tendencies, repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialisation and all the three must be borne in mind if one wishes to give a complete definition of the caste system."²⁹

Bougle however takes nearly the same view about the origin of caste as Nesfield. About the origin of this hierarchy, he writes,

"One has only with Nesfield to arrange the castes in their order of dignity and one can demonstrate that they are more or less high in the industrial scale. The lowest are those which preserve those kinds of activity only known to the primitive phases of human history. The castes of fishermen and hunters, those who practise the simplest

skills, known before the age of metallurgy, such as basket makers, pottery and oil pressers-castes occupy inferior ranks. But those who worked with metals have more prestige."³⁰

Dumont differs fundamentally on this point and points out that the whole structure of castes originated from a certain ideological predilection which, he insists, is religious in nature. He asserts that in this context man can only be understood as a part of a structural setting as one finds in India. A person cannot be taken individually but he has to be considered as one unit who is related to the complex pattern of a social setting, every unit being related and inter related to each other. This context differs from the modern western setting. Dumont further illustrates that caste is entirely a unique institution and it should not be compared with other institutions simply because it shares some features in common with them. According to him, the unique feature in caste system is its separating of status and power. Hence traditional societies cannot be understood with modern mentality. He also asserts that hierarchy and inequality are natural to man. Indians, according to Dumont's assumption, consciously accepted the ethos of a society where hierarchy based status difference exists.³¹

In Hindu society primacy is given to the whole and this whole is structured hierarchically. Since this idea plays a key role in his analysis it is worth while placing his views in his own words:

"..... A general theory of inequality, if it is necessary, must be centred upon those societies which give its meaning and not upon those which while presenting certain forms of it have chosen to disavow it. It must be a theory of hierarchy in its simple and direct form as well as its non 'valorized' or 'de valorized' or complex, hybrid, covort forms. In so doing one will of course in no way impose upon one society the values of another but only endeavour, to set mutually 'in perspective' the various types of societies, one will try to see each society in the light not only of itself but of others."³²

Besides the above theories, some new economic interpretations of the origin of castes have been advanced by some Marxist scholars like D. D. Kosambi³³ and R. S. Sharma.³⁴ They simply assumewhat should have been proved that the Aryan tribe gradually disintegrated into classes and that this somehow led to their division into castes. Failing to find an explanation of his own on these lines, R. S. Sharma seeks to relate Senarat's division to this supposed division into classes, to get the caste system. He writes

"It seems, then, that in the beginning, the upanayana was the affair of the whole tribe but as the tribe disintegrated into classes, it became a prerogative a honorific distinction to be attained by means of wealth and high social position, which gave the initiated access to more or less exclusive status, after secret soci-

eties. Following Senarat's view that class exogamy and tribe endogamy later developed into the feature of the caste system, it may well be argued that the tribal initiation was transformed into the upanayana of the three higher varnas with the result that it helped to bring about the social degradation of the Shudras"³⁵

This explanation looks rather simple and lacking in reliability. According to this explanation, upanayana was an honorific prerogative attained by distinction of wealth. When examining the caste system one notices that those who belong to the lowest caste ranks have been denied the criterion of wealth and it stands as the most distinguishing characteristic of caste division. He himself says at another place that Shudras were a conquered race. A conquered race cannot accumulate wealth. If such a race is denied the right to attain wealth how could it expect to get the honorific prerogative of upanayana? Thus is stand point becomes contradictory. Ambedkar has also opened that the degradation of Shudras resulted from denial of upanayana to them. At the same time Ambedkar is of the opinion that it was a deliberate act of vengeance by Brahmans. He himself thinks that the denial of upanayana was a result of their getting poor. There certainly is a correlation between the economic position of the caste taken as a whole, and its social position. It would be more plausible to assume with greater validity that the caste system arose as a result of some tribes having been subordinated by some who were more powerful. Those who emerged as masters incidentally imposed certain economic disabilities on those who were subjugated. The economic reason was not the most predominant one for the origin of caste system in India. If the economic origin of caste system were valid then as the economic status of some lower castes improved later, they should have been merged with those who belonged to the higher economic order. In this situation the caste system would not have remained in its present form. But it is clear that the division is along other lines. Hence chances in an individuals economic position does not as a rule change his caste position, though the two are not absolutely independent of each other.

Structural Features of Caste

As shown earlier the complex and intricate nature of the institution of caste enthused many to study the institution from different angles. Broadly, from the methodological standpoint, one may identify three different approaches to caste studies. These are (a) Classical-scriptural, (b) Cultural anthropological and (c) Sociological. The first tends to study the institution with reference to the classical religious texts. The second tends to study caste from the institutional and relational aspect while the third views caste as a system of stratification functioning in a social matrix.³⁶

The interest of the early western scholars or administrators in the institution of caste generated two types of

research. First, Indologists like Wilson, Colebrooke, Max Muller and Zimmer took a classical scriptural approach and the sacred literature of Hindus were scanned to discuss the institution. The other group consisting mainly of British administrators with scholarly orientation become interested in the ethnographic study of the social and cultural diversity of the institution. Thus Dalton, Nesfield, Risley, W. Crooke, Thurston, Russell and Hiralal, Ibbetson etc. produced many ethnographic studies of caste customs and practices and the field data generated thereby immensely helped the course of subsequent researches on caste. This interest in the nature and definition of caste continues unabated till today. That research on caste constitutes a significant portion of the total volume of academic researches in the universities, is evident from a trend report written by S. Sinha.³⁷ One such report indicates that the number of publications on caste up to present are well over six thousand.³⁸ The reason adduced for this preference for researches on caste is probably the extremely local or micro-level nature of its functioning. Each local system feeds a particular type of local organisation which considerably enhances the scope of research on caste. As Mandelbaum points out, "caste organisation has flourished as a vast series of local systems each partially independent of others."³⁹ So, in spite of Sromovas's claim that 'caste provides a common cultural idiom to Indians', questions may be raised regarding the contents of this idiom. Modern sociologists are mostly interested in this aspect of caste as a functioning system.⁴⁰ Senarat point out long ago that on caste "the relationship of facts leaves room for a multitude of fine shades of difference and that only the most general characteristics are common to the whole domain." Yet, in spite of those local variations, some general structural features of caste can be singled out. Attempts have been made by various writers to define the caste system but the intricacy of the institution has baffled them to arrive at a precise definition. In spite of their varied differences of opinion, all of them have attempted to discuss what caste means.

The classical writers like Mees, Risley, Nesfield defined caste in terms descending from a mythical ancestor rather than coming down from the 'gotra'.

H. H. Risley says:

"A caste may be defined as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community."⁴¹

G. H. Mees writes:

"A society subjected to a caste system consists of a number of subdivisions or castes which are exclusively endogamous, which show a strong tendency to be socially exclusive, which perpetuate themselves hereditarily, which are hierarchically superimposed on a basis of standard supposedly cultural and which by the working of these

four tendencies within the social field of their own delimitations may split up into more and more castes indefinitely."⁴²

In general, according to the classical texts on caste, it is a 'social group having two characteristics. They are

1. Membership is confined to those who are born of members.
2. The members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of these groups has a special name by which it is called. Several of such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name. Thus we see that there are several stages of groups and that the word caste is applied to groups at any stage.

The sociological interpretations of caste are based on its structural features. Unlike the classical writers, sociologists describe caste system as a system of social stratification and also as an example of ranked aggregates of people who are rigid and which permits no individual mobility.

Some sociologists enumerate five factors which are the outstanding factors of any society governed by an ideal pattern of caste.⁴³ In them are included.

A) A sub system within a larger social system

The groups constituting a caste system are differentiated from the other castes in particular characteristics pertaining to their particular groups. Yet they are interacting and interdependent parts of a larger society to which they belong and they have to operate within that larger society, and are economically interdependent with it. These different caste groups are occupationally specialised in jobs and crafts of their own. Every one belongs to a caste and no one belongs to more than one caste. Thus each caste group constitutes a sub-system within a larger system.

B) Corporate Entity

Each caste group operates within a hierarchical order and is composed of aggregates of people who are sociologically distinct. Such caste groups can be observed as ranked entities living and exercising within clearly defined bounds. Their corporate rights and responsibilities vary widely according to their identities. The members usually share a group name.

C) Hierarchical Order

Caste system is based on a distinct hierarchical order. This hierarchy has evolved through times and the difference between high and low castes constitutes an integral part of the system. This is in spite of the fact that the position of each caste group within the hierarchical order is somewhat uncertain and this uncertainty constitutes a vital element behind the flexibility of the system. Thus caste system provide for a system of institutionalised inequality.

Leach also delineates some common aspects of caste which are its characteristic features. He agrees with Hutton's characterization of caste which are

- i. A caste is endogamous
- ii. There are restrictions on commensality among members of different castes.
- iii. There is a hierarchical grading of castes, the best recognised position being that of the Brahmin at the top.
- iv. In various kinds of contexts especially those concerned with food, sex and rituals, a member of a 'high' caste is liable to be polluted by either direct or indirect contact with a member of a 'Low caste'.
- v. Castes are very commonly associated with some defined occupations.
- vi. A man's caste status is finally determined by the circumstances of his birth unless he is expelled from his caste for some ritual offence.
- vii. The system as a whole is always focused on the prestige accorded to the Brahmins.⁴⁴

To end this discussion it is important to examine the idea that the caste system is essentially based on religious norms. This means that those who do not operate in terms of religious (especially Hindu) beliefs in theory cannot have a caste system in the Hindu sense. Furthermore the ubiquity of the system is proved by the fact that 'for these to be caste, the entire society must without remainder be made up of a set of castes'.⁴⁵ But the Sinhalese situation is somewhat different from this Hindu model. In understanding the situation in Sri Lanka, it is important to mention two main aspects relating to the Sri Lankan castes. Firstly, although the Sinhalese social system has long been subjected to Hindu influences, the Sinhalese have remained Buddhists which is their dominant religion. Secondly, they do not have any Brahmin like caste and they do not have any correspondingly monopolised Brahminical role. Instead, as Dumont correctly observed, the Sinhalese king remained at the centre of both group religion (as opposed to individualistic religion the discipline of Buddhist salvation) and political and economic life. In short, among the Sinhalese "the hierarchy is mixed with power".⁴⁶

In analysing this point in detail it is important to mention that while the Hindu elements brought in by the Indian immigrants were implanted on the Sri Lankan soil, Buddhism, which was introduced at a very early stage, became an important factor moulding the Sinhalese way of life and preventing the emergence of "Brahmins as a cohesive caste wielding secular organising power upon sacred grounds". As Ryan further observes, while the Indian social organisation was developed upon a base which in Northern India was redefined and crystallised under the Brahminical domination. In Buddhist Ceylon

any Brahmin like group played no such corresponding role.

The nature of the Sinhalese social system has to be examined not only in the context of Indian influences but also in the light of the emergent local conditions. Thus a careful examination of the growth of Sinhalese social institutions would reveal that they were a product of the interaction between the important elements of Buddhism on the one hand and the local conditions characterised by Sinhalese feudalism on the other. The Sinhalese caste system is neither totally imported nor totally local in orientation. This fundamental feature of the growth of the Sinhalese caste system is reflected in its distinct character.

So far, we have seen how some sociologists and anthropologists have formulated their definitions, concepts and attributes of caste according to their particular central concerns. We have also seen that there is no universal perspective for analysing caste. We will now discuss the other relevant ideas that have been presented by several sociologists about caste viz. the nature of caste as a status group and its relation with class.

Caste and Class:

Caste and class are the most important elements in social stratification. There has been a prolonged controversy regarding the relative primacy of caste or class in the Indian situation. As we described earlier, some sociologists have considered the Indian society as a caste society.⁴⁷ On the other hand some of them have observed that class factor is more relevant in modern times and that even in ancient India stratification was essentially based on class division. As is well known, social class is a central concept in Marx's general theory on history and social development. According to Marx, classes must be defined by their 'relationship' to the means of production and exchange in society, not by criteria such as occupation and income of a person.⁴⁸ Thus, class can be identified in economic terms. "Social class is a term used to classify people according to the rewards and privileges they possess as a consequence of their economic standing in society".⁴⁹ Again, social classes may be thought of as ideal types used by the social theorist to describe the ordering (ranking) of people in an industrial society. Classes are described objectively in terms of occupation, income, education and the network of social interaction; but they are arbitrarily separated into higher and lower levels by the theorist.⁵⁰ Weber defined social class in relation to the market situation, not exclusively in terms of the ownership or non ownership of the means of production and exchange. For him social class is a feature of a market economy dominated by money which plays an extremely important role in it.

The conceptual distinction between caste and class was elaborately analysed by Max Weber in his writings especially on the 'Economy and Society'. Based on the premise that caste and class are antithetical elements in