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THE CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS OF CASTE

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People who read the pink papers are often perplexed by caste. There are good reasons for this. An ancient, complex and adaptable institution that continually discovers new sources of sustenance is surely a worthy puzzle. But a more obvious reason for our bafflement is that, for people like us, caste seems far from experience. It may have been the homeland of our ancestors, but to us, it is just a foreign country. Finally, in a moral climate where it is treated like an embarrassing disease, we don't "get" caste because we don't want to get it.

As a guide to the perplexed, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein offered a robust rule of thumb: The meaning of a word, he said, is to be found in its use. So one way to answer a question such as: What is caste in 21st century India? is to ask another: What does caste do in today's world? The latter question has the virtue of bypassing definitional debates and fast forwarding our encounter with the empirical world. But as we set out on this voyage of discovery, we must remember that we will mostly be meeting people who are, at first glance, very unlike us.

In terms of its uses, caste today is at least four things: it is a powerful idea; an important identity; a resilient form of community; and a type of material resource or capital. Though these use-based meanings of caste are closely related and sometimes morph into each other, it is still helpful to think about them as being distinct.

As an idea, the heart of caste is hierarchy, which is itself defined by notions of separateness and inequality. Caste is a relational thing and it maps the world in terms of relations of graded inequality. People must decipher this complex map and use it to locate themselves in the world, and Indians internalize it effortlessly. The colloquial Hindustani word *aukaat* best expresses the idea of caste; it is about relative standing—about who is above or below us, and to what degree.

Unlike the abstract and mostly unspoken idea of *aukaat*, identity is an explicit form of recognition, whether chosen, imposed or "found". Caste remains an important form of contemporary identity and the most visible arena in which it finds play is politics. However, one should not be misled into thinking of "casteism" as having corrupted politics. Caste identities long pre-existed modern politics; with the coming of universal franchise, politics has entered caste to mobilize its identities for electoral purposes. Given their relative numbers, lower caste politics tends to be noisy and direct, while upper caste politics is usually forced to be silent and devious.

Caste is also used to define community, or the boundaries and norms of social intimacy that shape our personal lives. Caste as community is most clearly present in the field of kinship and marriage. Caste endogamy or marrying within one's caste is a remarkably resilient practice as matrimonial advertisements continue to demonstrate even in the age of the Internet. This sphere is crucial for the practices that shape the structures of exclusion and inclusion so central to caste as an institution. While some lines, such as those within the upper castes, may have grown blurred, others— such as those separating Dalits from all others—remain as sharp as ever, as shown by the "honour killings" in recent years.

Last but far from least, caste is a crucial form of capital. Only partially captured by the popular term "social capital", this aspect of caste relates to the wide variety of skills, attitudes, knowledge and networks that one acquires by virtue of membership in a caste-community. The most visible form of this inheritance is, of course, property of various kinds such as a lawyer or doctor's practice or the good will accumulated by a neighbourhood shop. Because these kinds of inheritances are mediated by the family, and because they also have a class character, the caste element can often be invisible.

Survey data show a puzzling gap in the levels of living across castes even after the usual economic variables are controlled for. Within the same occupations, at the same educational levels and in the same geographical regions, there is often a 15-30% difference in per capita consumption expenditure across caste groups. It is these differences that caste-as-capital may help explain. Apart from intangible skills or competences, an important element is the presumption of competence or incompetence that attaches to individuals by virtue of their caste membership and is, at least initially, quite independent of actual ability.

These contemporary meanings of caste need to be contextualized in terms of two further factors. The first has to do with the peculiar history of caste as the only pervasive social institution that independent India vowed to abolish. How precisely does one "abolish" a way of life? Nehruvian India, led by well meaning upper caste leaders, chose the path of caste-blindness, which meant constitutional abolition of caste plus a ban on public discussion. This legal, oral and moral ban remained formal—it was not accompanied by serious attempts to abolish the substantive privileges and disprivileges of caste. Caste inequalities continued unchecked and even worsened in some spheres, while the rhetoric of a casteless society lost all credibility and was rightly denounced as a fraud.

The second factor is a direct outcome of the first; this is the widespread belief among the most privileged sections of the upper castes that they have no caste. By the third generation, privileged upper castes nurtured in a caste-blind society found that their caste was a ladder they could safely kick away since it had already done everything that it could for them. One of the crowning ironies of 21st century India is that claims of being casteless are today the unmistakable signs of an upper caste identity.

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This is the last of a five-part series on the changing role of caste in a globalized India.

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