

Aspects of Social Mobility in India*

Detlef Kantowsky

This paper is a short attempt to summarize various doubts regarding the analytical usefulness and validity of the ubiquitous caste-concept and to give better guidelines for future investigations into hierarchical aspects of the Indian social system¹.

Social Sciences and The Great Tradition

„Verlaufene Brahmanen sind mehrentheils Unwissende, deren Genossen keinen reellen Verrath von ihnen zu befürchten haben, und, wie sich mit vieler Wahrscheinlichkeit folgern läßt, Nichtswürdige, die sich noch weniger ein Gewissen daraus machen werden, unseren Europäern bare Lügen aufzuheften, als sie Anstand nehmen, ihre Caste, und mit derselben alles zu verlassen, was man sonst von Jugend auf, als heilig und ehrwürdig hat verehren gelernt.

Diese Zweifel gelten, einem großen Theile nach, gegen dasjenige, was uns Reisende und Gelehrte bisher von dem Wesentlichen des Brahmanenthums erzählt haben, und vielleicht ließen diese Zweifel sich noch weiter treiben, wenn ihnen gleich ein oder das andere Mahl die Benutzung brahmanischer Originalschriften entgegenzustehen scheint.“²

Generation after generation of social scientists has been taught to see Indian society as **the** example of a rigid hierarchical system based purely on ascriptive

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¹ Those familiar with recent publications on this topic will soon recognize that I am highly indebted to André Béteille, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, Leslie Willson, and the contributions to two seminars held at Chicago in 1962 and 1965 respectively: Béteille, A., A Note on the Referents of Caste. In: *European Journal of Sociology*, V (1964), 130–134. Béteille, A., Closed and Open Social Stratification. In: *European Journal of Sociology*, VII (1966), 224–246. Béteille, A., Ideas and Interests: Some Conceptual Problems in the Study of Social Stratification in India. In: *International Social Sciences Journal*, XXI (1969), 219–234. Béteille, A., Castes: Old and New. *Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification*. London: Asia Publishing House, 1969. Béteille, A., The Politics of „Non-Antagonistic“ Strata. Paper, unpubl., Delhi: 1969. Rudolph, L. I. and Susanne H., *The Modernity of Tradition. Political Development in India*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967. Silverberg, J., ed., *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India. An Interdisciplinary Symposium. Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Suppl. III, The Hague: Mouton, 1968. Singer, M. and Cohn, B. S., eds., *Structure and Change in Indian Society*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Comp., 1968. Willson, L. A., *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1964.

² Quoted from: „Vorbericht des deutschen Bearbeiters“, p. III and IV in: *Darstellung der Brahmanisch-Indischen Götterlehre, Religionsbräuche und bürgerlichen Verfassung*. Nach dem lateinischen Werke des Vater Paullinus a St. Bartholomeo bearbeitet. Gotha: Carl Wilhelm Ettinger, 1797.

mechanisms of status-determination. If we follow an often quoted statement by Kingsley Davis the Indian caste-system has to be characterized as "the most thorough-going attempt known in human history to introduce inherited inequality as the guiding principle in social relationships"³. In this system expectations of behaviour and norms of conduct fall upon individuals according to the caste into which they happen to be born. Its structure could perpetuate itself over centuries because the individual, as we are taught, accepts the roles ascribed to him by birth and can aspire to upward mobility only via the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. Probably one of the best examples to illustrate this static image of the Indian society was given by Taya Zinkin in her book on "Caste Today":

"If one performs the duties of one's station conscientiously one may be reborn in a better station, or — supreme bliss — not be reborn at all. Under such circumstances vertical mobility such as we find in the West, where the successful coalminer's son goes to Eton, marries a duke's daughter and ends in the House of Lords, is meaningless. The Hindu equivalent would be the good sweeper who sweeps humbly, does not mind being treated like a pariah and is reborn a Brahmin."⁴

This example contains in a nutshell the main elements of a false image of Indian society as it developed during the last one-hundred-and-fifty years: The Indian system is a closed hierarchical one, at the apex of which are the Brahmins. The life of all members of the system is guided by the "dharma-karma" concept as laid down in ancient philosophical texts. To understand this systems in all its rigidity one must of course compare it with an open Western society like that of the British, where, unhindered by any barriers, people speed up and down the social ladder according to their own best abilities and those of their families.

The sources of such a false image have been traced carefully in the following three directions: The **orientalists** developed, with the help of alienated pundits as their main informants, a textual view of Hinduism. Here the British **administrators** found at least the instruments necessary to explain an otherwise totally alien situation. The caste-concept as **the** structuring principle of Indian society served them as a facile means of arranging otherwise untidy social facts into a set of entities easy to administrate. To this image of a caste-wise departmentalized society exotic colour was added by the **missionaries** and their campaigns against the burning of widows, child-marriage and human sacrifice as spectacular consequences of heathenish heresy.

Astonishing though it was, the image seemed to be true. The Census of 1901 pigeon-holed the Indian society into a hierarchical complex of boxes with different caste-names; thereupon its members proved in endless litigations for advancement in census-ascribed caste-status that they indeed intended to take the game seriously. At the same time the results of intensive studies of sanskrit texts by European scholars provided a westernized and socially isolated Indian intelligentsia with a mirror where they could see themselves as heirs of the glorious past of a varna-divided society and the illiterate as their traditional clientele.

Bureaucracy and Indology both worked in the same direction and thereby made "ego" very soon behave the way "alter" expected him to behave. As a consequence

³ Davis, K., Human Society. New York: The Macmillian Comp., 1948, p. 377.

⁴ Zinkin, T., Caste Today. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 9.

of a kind of self-fulfilling-prophecy-process the Indian social system finally took the rigid shape the foreign rulers wanted it to have as a legitimation for colonial tutelage and guidance.

It is saddening to see the role of the social sciences in this perspective. Taking the caste-concept and ancient Hindu philosophy as basic structural and ideological principles of Indian society, it was comparatively easy for Max Weber to prove that the development of the West and the stagnation of the East were consequences of internal forces⁵. Marx of course saw the exploitive relationship between West-European industrialisation and colonial rule in Asia, but even he was a victim of the interpretative images of his time insofar as he too believed in the ancient Indian village community as a pre-capitalist paradise of mutual cooperation.

Caste-structure, village-community and dharma-ideology became the three cornerstones of social-scientific reasoning about a "static society". This society was believed to consist of such unique features that at a certain point the question had to come up whether a special "Sociology for India" would be necessary to explain it.

Today our perspective is certainly different. The "colonial image" of Indian society is gradually being replaced by a more complicated multidimensional view; but we still carry part of the old orientative schemes with us. We have changed caste for "jati" and we describe the functional relationship of mutual obligations and duties within a village as "jajmani-system"; we reckon with dominant castes as expressions of a secular power-system, and within the sanskritization-westernization model we even allow for a certain degree of mobility. Yet these "modern" approaches still take either "caste" or "Hindu values" as points of departure for further analysis. Though this might be useful in certain analytical respects I strongly doubt whether it will help us if we want to study aspects of stratification and mobility in India.

A **jati** is described as an endogamous unit which is further subdivided into exogamous lineages and clans. The "Koeris" in a village near Benares for instance think of themselves as belonging to three different lineages ("khandan") within a special "gotram" of the "Shakt" sub-caste of the Koeris in Eastern Uttar-Pradesh. Suppose we are able to trace similar networks of kinship and mythology for the various individuals and families belonging to the different jatis within a certain area. Could we say that we have thereby drawn a kind of stratification-map of this area? Certainly not; all that we have done is to further subdivide and complicate the pigeon-holes of the classical census-officer.

A **dominant caste** is said to command decisive economic and political power within a certain area so that its expectations are fulfilled by the members of other castes within the territorial community. But does that mean that all members of a dominant caste participate in the process of informal government? Or does the dominant-caste-concept imply that members of only one caste can participate in the power-game? Facts would prove the opposite. Quite often "dominance" within a certain area is exercised by a limited number of members of different castes, and the solidarity of those who actually dominate includes only symbolically the poor

⁵ For an excellent critique of Weber's study see: Rösler, J. A., *Zur Hinduismus-These Max Webers. Eine kritische Würdigung*. Magisterarbeit der Philosophischen Fakultäten der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität zu Freiburg i. Br. Freiburg: 1971.

brethren of the same castes. It is evident that the "dominant-caste-concept" cannot help us to solve the dilemma that a value-derived image of society and reality as we sketch it in our field-notes do not correspond.

The term "**sanskritization**", finally, refers again to the religious dimension of Indian society and is meant to describe a process whereby members of a certain caste try to rise in status by giving up low-caste practices and norms of behaviour. Yet is ritual sanskritization really a means to or, as a kind of symbolic justification, merely a consequence of social mobility?

All models developed by the social sciences so far to explain Indian phenomenon show that we are still victims of The Great Tradition. This is not to say that henceforth we should completely avoid ancient textual views and Brahmanic interpretations of this society. But a shift of emphasis is certainly needed, a different approach which takes caste as only one structural aspect and not as **the** structuring principle in general. Caste should be analyzed as a ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs and evaluations, and as the ritual dimensions of a society to which, in the interests of socio-scientific development, the same analytical tools ought to be applied which we use in other socio-cultural contexts.

This of course means that with respect to social mobility we are immediately faced with a dilemma, i.e. the present position of the theory of social stratification⁶. As long as we take caste as **the** stratifying principle of Indian society, as long as we measure mobility in terms of ritual superiority or inferiority, we have an apparently simple yard-stick that is always ready for use. The moment we throw it away and look for alternatives we are faced with the same difficulties that students of social stratification and mobility have to encounter everywhere: What are the units to be observed? What kind of sample should be chosen? Which dimensions should be measured to give valid information regarding upward and downward movements of the units selected in the sample chosen?

In Search of an Alternative Model: Some Propositions

In a recently published paper Ralf Dahrendorf has summarized the dismal state of the theory of stratification which is strongly illustrated by the fact that in this area constructive abstraction and social research are worlds apart. According to him "there is almost literally no connection between the 'Principles of Stratification' or the 'Revised Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification' and studies of caste in India, occupational prestige in Australia, or income differentials in Britain"⁷. One has to admit, moreover, that what passes by the name of stratification-theory in contemporary sociology is for the most part not theory at all. Rather, it consists of sets of statements and assumptions which may be called general

⁶ For a more detailed discussion see: Mayer, K. U. and Müller, W., Roles, Status and Careers. Some Comments about Mobility Analysis and New Data on Intergenerational Mobility in West Germany. A Working Paper for the Session on Theory, Research and Simulation Studies on Social Mobility. International Congress of Sociology, Varna: 1970.

⁷ Dahrendorf, R., The Present Position of the Theory of Social Stratification. Paper presented to the Sixth World Congress of Sociology, Evian, Sept. 3-10, 1966, p. 23. Only a German translation of this paper has been published in: Dahrendorf, R. Pfade aus Utopia. Arbeiten zur Theorie und Methodologie der Soziologie. München: Piper, 1967, p. 336-352.

orientations, or meta-theories, or even images of society. Yet even such "images of society" can have a useful function in the theory-building process: they provide a perspective which directs attention to certain problems, certain factors, certain theoretical solutions at the expense of others.

All our studies of Indian society started more or less from the metatheory of a caste-wise departmentalized society in which the individuals' future roles are determined by ascriptive mechanisms. This pre-theoretical image of the society to be studied directed our theoretical reasoning into the sphere of values and their functional integration. As a consequence we neglected the class- and power-dimensions for which there was neither room nor necessity in the ideal-type of the ancient Indian village community. It could therefore be very useful to start with a completely different model and the assumption that the Indian society is an open class-society in which only certain interactions within its ritual complex are fixed by ascription. One could also try to begin not with social preconceptions but with the observation of actual social interactions and individuals' behaviour with regard to various cognitive dimensions such as family, income, education, occupation, region and caste.

A foreigner for instance, coming to a village in Eastern Uttar Pradesh might be told that its 1200 inhabitants comprise members of twenty castes, namely Brahmins, Thakurs, Koeris, Chamars, Ahirs, Bindhs, Kohars, Lohars, Dhobis, Doms, Bhumihars, Tambolis, Haluwais, Nais, Telis, Kahars, and others. What kind of conclusions could be drawn from this information? Obviously the village must perform a central function for the surrounding area because it contains so many servicing castes. Via kinship-networks it must be linked with a vast number of other villages, as each endogamous unit has its own marriage-relationships with particular areas. But what about the village hierarchy in terms of obedience and command? Who exploits whom? Who are the rich and who are the poor?

Following the concept derived from The Great Tradition we would have to arrange the castes of the village according to their relative position in a ritual scale of untouchability and defilement. Who accepts what kind of food from whom? Who is allowed to offer water to whom? Who may sit and who has to stand where and in the presence of whom? We could then try to put our information into a matrix out of which we might be able to develop a hierarchical system with the Brahmins, Bhumihars and Thakurs at the top, the Chamars and Doms at the bottom, and a rather homogeneous middle-group in which the Koeris and Ahirs would rank higher than Dhobis and Nais. Pauline Mahar and McKim Marriott have invested a great deal of their energy, experimental imagination and technical skill in such multiple scaling techniques and a matrix-analysis of caste-ranking and food-transactions⁸. Yet the questions they asked were clearly based on the purity-defilement complex; McKim Marriott admits that his informants' "opinions were often explicitly based upon known interactions in food"⁹.

⁸ Mahar, P. M., A Multiple Scaling Technique for Caste Ranking. In: *Man in India*, XXXIX (1959), 127-147. Mahar, P. M., A Ritual Pollution Scale for Ranking Hindu Castes. In: *Sociometry*, XXIII (1960), 292-306. Marriott, McKim, Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis. pp. 133-171, in: Singer/Cohn, eds., *Structure and Change in Indian Society*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

But are we really interested in seating-arrangements at marriage ceremonies? Are "interactions in food" a valid indicator for all aspects of the village hierarchy? Numerous examples could be cited to illustrate that this is certainly not the case and that status and prestige cannot be measured along the ritual axis of defilement and food-transactions alone. At least three more dimensions will have to be included: wealth, occupation and education which are of different importance in different social milieu. In the countryside ownership of land continues to be the main criteria of determining the influence and status of a family, so that a well-to-do Koeri is more influential in village affairs than a "purohit" who serves a poor clientele.

One of the main tasks of future research will, therefore, be to find out the importance of different status-dimensions for various groups of the population. Who invests in education and who in land? What are the differences between urban and rural, between workers' and farmers' evaluative systems of hierarchical classification and achievement motivation? What are the units of ranking and mobility? Is it the individual, the family, the "biradari" (brotherhood) or the jati? What kind of data constitutes the most significant test of social mobility?

In accordance with well-tested research designs these questions have to be investigated in urban and rural milieu among different income-levels and occupational groups to obtain a set of indices with which a multidimensional model of stratification and mobility can be constructed for future research.

Mobility, Economic Development, and the Political System

One could of course ask whether such research has any practical relevance for our understanding of India's present socio-economic and political situation or if it is only an intellectual pastime? Therefore, it should be made clear that social mobility as a process whereby people are able to change their conditions of living is a main prerequisite of economic development within a democratic political system¹⁰. Once a community has set itself the goal of raising the level of living, it is dependent upon individuals who are willing to strive for advancement. Only if a major part of the population is thereby motivated to work for more than bare subsistence, a surplus is gained out of which further productive investments can be made. India's economic policy has to depend upon voluntary contributions made by the various economic units towards the common economic goals planned. Forced labour is not within reach of the development authorities. They simply have to put their faith in achievement-oriented people and trust the impact of a modern ideology which tries to give the individual the conviction that hard work and rational economic behaviour will result in an improvement of his own status and that of his family.

¹⁰ This argument is developed further in: Smelser, N. J. and Lipset, S. M., eds., *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Comp., 1966. Tumin, M., *Social Stratification and Social Mobility in the Development Process*. In: Ward, R. J., ed., *The Challenge of Development*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Comp., 1967. For a recent discussion of this problem in the Indian context see: Nijhawan, N. K., *Occupational Mobility and Political Development. Some Preliminary Findings*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. VI, Nos. 3, 4 & 5 (Annual Number 1971), p. 317-324. An excellent case study is: Hinderink, J. and Kiray, M. B., *Social Stratification as an Obstacle to Development: A Study of four Turkish Villages*. New York/London: Praeger, 1970.

Leaving aside the socio-psychological problem whether the child experiences a sufficiently achievement-oriented training during the socialization-process within the Indian family, studies of social mobility and stratification are the means not only of testing egalitarian ideologies but also of predicting trends of further economic and political development.

Supposing that such a test showed that the Indian society is still characterized by a rather high degree of status-crystallization which makes it more or less impossible for an individual to improve his social position via the educational and occupational channels which allow for a certain degree of flexibility in Western societies. And furthermore supposing that a careful analysis of the Indian educational system proved that it is indeed successful insofar as it induces a reasonably high degree of ambition and achievement-potential in the average youth who, soon after leaving an average college, has to realize that in an economic system of scarcity and status-crystallization performance alone is not at all sufficient for a career in the higher echelons of the social hierarchy.

Two conclusions could be drawn from such results: Firstly, one could predict a continuing low-level-equilibrium of the economic system because it does not stimulate a majority of its participants to aim at additional output and at a performance above the subsistence-level. Secondly, one could predict, especially among the educated unemployed, a feeling of relative deprivation tending to manifest itself in political agitation against "The Raj" as the agency felt to be responsible for the failure of development plans that had tried to stimulate maximum performance via egalitarian ideologies.