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Caste Is Not Past

By LAVANYA SANKARAN JUNE 15, 2013

BANGALORE, India — CASTE is not a word that modernizing India likes to use. It has receded to the unfashionable background. Newspapers reserve their headlines for the newer metrics of social hierarchy: wealth and politics, and those powerful influencers of popular culture, actors and cricket stars.

There are two stories we tell ourselves in urban India. One is about how education transforms lives. It is the golden key to the future, allowing people to rise above the circumstances of their birth and background. And sometimes, it does. In my own neighborhood, a few sons and daughters of cooks and gardeners are earning their engineering and business degrees, and sweeping their families into the middle class. Not many, certainly. But enough that this is a valid hope, a valid dream.

The other story is about how the last two decades of economic growth have fundamentally changed the country, creating jobs and income and nurturing aspiration where earlier there was none. New money and an increasingly powerful middle class are supposedly displacing the old social hierarchies.

These are exciting stories, even revolutionary in a country where, for centuries, the social order was considered immutable. Traditionally, Indian society was divided into four main castes. At the top, Brahmins, as priests and

teachers; second came the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers; third, Vaishyas, who were merchants; last, Shudras, the laborers. And below them all, the Dalits, or untouchables, called Harijans, or “children of God,” by Mahatma Gandhi (for indeed, who isn’t?).

The castes were ostensibly professional divisions but were locked firmly into place by birth and a rigid structure of social rules that governed interaction between and within them.

That, famously, was then. Discrimination based on caste has been illegal in India for more than six decades. In today’s urban India, this land of possibility, separated from rural India by cultural and economic chasms, it seems reactionary even to speak of caste. Certainly it shouldn’t — and usually doesn’t — come up at work or at play or in the apartment elevator.

If it features in urban conversations at all, it is defanged, reduced to cultural stereotypes and amusing-if-annoying tropes that never bother with political correctness. Gujarati Baniyas of the Vaishya caste have a keen eye on finance. Tamil Brahmins do math and classical music. Nobody parties or fights harder than a Punjabi Khatri (of the Kshatriyas). It’s the equivalent, in America, of expecting the Asian kid to have good grades, the black man to be the best dancer and the Jewish guy to be well-read and have some slight mother issues.

As India transforms, one might expect caste to dissolve and disappear, but that is not happening. Instead, caste is making its presence felt in ways similar to race in modern America: less important now in jobs and education, but vibrantly alive when it comes to two significant societal markers — marriage and politics.

No surprise on that first one. Inter-caste marriages in India are on the rise but still tend to be the province of the liberal few. For much of the country, with its penchant for arranged marriages and close family ties, caste is still a primary determinant in choosing a spouse.

Politics is where caste has gotten a surprising new lease on life. After money and education, democracy is, of course, the third powerful force transforming Indian society. But Indians, it turns out, are passionate about the caste of their politicians. Nearly half of the voting population of even a highly educated city like Bangalore considers caste to be the No. 1 reason to vote for a candidate.

Democracy gives power to people who previously had none. But, like race, caste can shift political discussions from present-day merit to payback for historical injustices.

Six decades of democratic statehood have attempted to correct the imbalances of the past through “reservation” — job and education quotas for the so-called backward castes, like the Dalits. This program has been effective, in a fairly hit-or-miss fashion. Some say that nearly all university seats are reserved for lower castes, effectively blocking Brahmins from higher education. Others point out that the vast majority of high paying jobs are still in the hands of the top three castes.

This, then, is the problem of discussing caste in India: the profound lack of information and contradictory data on the subject. Succeeding governments for years shied away from gathering caste-based data, preferring, with obscure political wisdom, to enact their policies in the dark. This changed in 2011, with the first Indian census to visit the subject in eight decades.

The ostensible reason for the caste census was to see where we were economically. But let’s have no doubt, the impact will be political.

Indian political parties have played caste politics for years. The powerful Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party and its derivatives have thrived on an anti-Brahmin platform in Tamil Nadu. The compelling rise of Mayawati, a Dalit woman who goes by one name, to chief minister of Uttar Pradesh was built on the support of her caste. But, once in office, her reputation as one of the world’s most influential female politicians was marred by corruption and

mismanagement in her administration. Last year, her party lost control of Uttar Pradesh's legislative assembly, and Ms. Mayawati resigned her position. Now, in an intriguing twist, she hopes to regain power by wooing not just Dalits but also Brahmins, arguing that the latter are newly marginalized.

The census results will give strategists their best tools for precisely targeting voters and tailoring campaign messages to caste concerns and fears. Caste will probably grow as a voter focal point, at the expense of administrative competency in economics, education, foreign policy, women's rights, the environment and every other vital matter of governance that concerns a growing India.

So that is the fascinating conundrum of Indian society: on one hand, caste is losing its virility as India opens up opportunities and mind-sets, while on the other, the forces of democratic politics ensure that it will thrive and never be forgotten as a crucial social index.

Lavanya Sankaran is the author of the novel "The Hope Factory."

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