

An Obituary on Caste as a System

The Bhakti movement of medieval India was really pan-Indian and attracted a large number of men and women from the lower orders and it even crossed the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. But it failed to make a dent on caste hierarchy. The moral to be drawn is that an ideological attack on caste which is not backed up or underpinned by a mode of social production ignoring or violating caste-based division of labour is totally inadequate. A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions based on new principles and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time to uproot the caste system. Such a combination of forces is today bringing about the destruction of the caste-based system of production in the villages and at the local level.

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I shall be arguing in this paper* that the localised system of production of foodgrains and other necessities (from now on "basic needs") based on a caste-wise division of labour is fast breaking down all over rural India, and is likely to disappear in the near future. This event is of momentous importance for it augurs the end of a social order which has continued for 2,000 years or more. The lineaments of the new social order – if it can indeed be called an order- are already visible.

I am aware that in regarding the subsistence economy of rural India, dependent upon a jati-based division of labour, as the essence of caste, I have made an assumption which may be unacceptable to some of my colleagues, sociologists, anthropologists, and Indologists. However, I hope that the rationale for my assumption will become clear as I proceed with my argument.

I shall now describe the main features of the system of production of basic needs. First, it was local, a cluster of neighbouring villages forming a unit rather than a single village even when the latter had several jatis. Each such cluster included one or more weekly markets, where villagers, and itinerant traders, would gather to exchange goods, or buy paying cash. The cluster

could claim a large degree of self-sufficiency as far as the production of basic needs was concerned, with the overarching value in the culture being contentment with one's lot.

Cash was scarce and used minimally, the artisan and servicing castes being paid with grain at the annual harvest. The rate and quantity of grain was determined by local custom. Further, members of the serving castes such as the barber and washerman had roles in life-cycle rituals in the landowning patron's household. In other words, economic relations were embedded in social relations sanctioned by custom and morality. Relationships between patrons and clients, if not between everyone living in the village, were multi-stranded and durable. Durability itself was valued, and relationships often continued from one generation to the next. This applied not only to friendly relations but also to antagonistic ones. One inherited one's friends as well as enemies.

Another essential characteristic of the system of production was hierarchy. The local sections of the jatis which came together to produce the basic needs of daily living, related to each other hierarchically. A vast amount has been written about hierarchy in recent years, and I shall confine myself to the points relevant to my argument. That the hierarchy expressed itself in the idiom of ritual purity and impurity is a matter of common knowledge. As also the fact that, speaking generally, the higher jatis and everything associated with them was pure while the

opposite was true of the lower jatis with untouchability marking the apex of impurity. But along with the ancient and higher articulated principles there was another, much less articulated but no less real and pervasive principle, namely, a jati's relationship to land. Landowners occupied the top of the pyramid while the landless were at the bottom. There was a graduation among landowners depending upon the amount of land owned by a household followed by tenants and sharecroppers, both categories being formally obtained in the land reforms following independence.

When a jati owned the bulk of land in a village, and enjoyed numerical strength, it exercised dominance in village affairs, everyone obeying its decrees, even castes marked ritually higher. Such jatis existed in most parts of rural India, and I called them 'dominant castes'. Another pan-Indian phenomenon was the existence of a large overlap between landlessness and traditional 'untouchable' castes, a fact which enhanced their poverty, misery, and exploitability.

Traditionally, every big landowner had, besides his tenants and sharecroppers, a few servants who worked for him and his household as tied labourers. A tied labourer generally spent a few years working for the landowner-master paying off a debt which he, his father, or guardian, had borrowed from the landowner. Such relationships also frequently continued from generation to generation. This is referred to as 'bonded labour' in the literature, and

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore and at the Department of Philosophy at Jadavpur University, Calcutta. My thanks to my colleagues and particularly to Dhanu Nayak for critically reading the manuscript.

it was legally banned in 1976, but manages to continue here and there surreptitiously.

The intermeshing of hierarchies based on ritual criteria and the nature of the group's access to arable land renders the hierarchy more complex, and if to this is added mercantile wealth and political power in urban areas the system becomes bewilderingly complex. Monistic interpretations of caste hierarchy, however indigenous, are doomed to failure.

The existence of a measure of congruence between land ownership and high ritual rank has led some interpreters to equate caste with class, representing a gross oversimplification of the reality. On the other hand, the existence of disjunction between status (ritual rank) and power is the hallmark of caste according to Louis Dumont (1970). I have discussed the inadequacies of this formulations elsewhere [Srinivas 1989:26-40] and I shall not repeat them here. I shall confine myself to making a few points about the nature of jati hierarchy which have not received enough attention.

Position in Rank Order

The first point I would like to make is that there is frequent disagreement regarding the position of a jati in the rank order, between the rank that a jati claims for itself and the rank conceded by others. Such disagreement is not confined to the middle regions of the hierarchy but may pervade the entire rank order. This is especially seen in parts of south India where jatis are grouped in 'right hand' and 'left hand' divisions. Thus a 'right hand' dalit would claim to be higher not only to the 'left hand' dalit but a brahmin of the 'left hand' division. Violent clashes between the two divisions used to erupt in towns in south India in the 18th century. These confrontations took the form of battles over deceptively trivial matters of ceremonial rank or temple honours [Bayly 1999:107-08]. Bayly proceeds to write: "this left hand ideology was apparently unknown outside the Telugu and Tamil country and it had virtually disappeared as a focus for so-called honour disputes by the mid-nineteenth century". I found that the right-left division alive and kicking in Rampura in Kannada country in 1948 [Srinivas 1955:23].

It is necessary here to mention the existence of certain brahmin jatis which are regarded as low in ritual rank. Some brahmin groups, who are in their culture and behaviour indistinguishable from other brahmin jatis, carry a stigma for reasons that are obscure, such as the Marka brahmins in Karnataka. Further, all

brahmins who perform funeral rites are looked down upon all over India, and Jonathan Parry (1980) had recorded that brahmins who perform funeral rites in Benaras are actually referred to as 'achchut' (untouchable).

The fact that the rank order of a jati in the local hierarchy is frequently a matter of doubt and ambiguity is, in my opinion, evidence of the dynamism of the caste system at the macro or all-India level. It enabled individual jatis to move up in the hierarchy over a time. This was especially true of the dominant castes which could, in times of political fluidity at the lower levels, seize power and in course of time lay claim to being Kshatriyas. It was the consolidation of British rule in the nineteenth century that put an end to endemic local wars and closed a most important avenue for upward mobility.

Historically viewed, the category of Kshatriya in the varna system has always been occupied by groups which managed to capture political power. According to K M Panikkar (1955), "the Nandas were the last 'true' Kshatriyas, and they disappeared in the fifth century BC. Since then every known royal family has come from a non-Kshatriya caste, including the famous Rajput dynasties of medieval India." He also points out that "the Shudras seem to have an unusually large number of royal families, even more in recent times. The Pals of Bengal belonged undoubtedly to that caste. The great Maratha royal houses, whatever their function today, could hardly sustain their genealogical pretensions connecting them with Rajput descent" [Panikkar 1955:9].

According to Romila Thapar even the Nandas hailed from lower origins: "Curiously enough the Nandas were the first of a number of non-Kshatriya dynasties. Most of the leading dynasties of northern India from now on belonged to castes other than Kshatriya, until the coming of Rajput dynasties a thousand years later" [Thapar 1966:57]. It is clear that for the period for which clear historical evidence is available, the category of Kshatriya was occupied by groups of low origin who were able to capture power.

To recapitulate: after making the point that production of basic needs of people occurred in a hierarchical social framework, I considered the nature of hierarchy mainly to dispute a few widely held myths about it. I shall now discuss the form of the relations prevalent among the groups involved in the production process.

The most widely held prevalent mode in the 1930s-40s was one in which particular households of artisan, servicing and

labouring groups were rewarded by their landowning patrons with agreed upon quantities of grain. The relationship was dyadic, between the patron and the client, and each region had its own word for it. The first anthropologist to provide a full description of it was W H Wiser who studied a village in the Hindi region and wrote about in a book titled *The Hindu Jajmani System* [Wiser 1936]. Wiser considered the system to be one of great antiquity and traced its origins to the laws of Manu. The term 'jajmani' gained wide currency and anthropologists writing about rural India accepted uncritically Wiser's assumptions about the system's antiquity. However, Wiser's assumptions were refuted by the political scientist, Peter Mayer in 1993 on an extensively researched paper entitled, 'Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the Jajmani System' [Mayer 1993:357-95]. He wrote: "I argue that the jajmani system is of relatively recent origin and is essentially a feature of the Gangetic plain". He pointed out that the system became popular only in the latter half of the 19th century. Two forces of change converged to facilitate the emergence of jajmani: the first of these was the growing partition of zamindari and bhaiyacharya villages into individual holdings, the second was the mounting pressure on landholders to offer significant incentives to village artisans to retain their services. Mayer seems to assume that all over the Gangetic plain, all land in villages was owned either by a body of agnatically related males (bhaiyacharya or biradri) or by a zamindar, with the result that artisans and others served the entire village and not the households of individual landowners. The relationship between artisan and servicing castes was 'demi-urge' a la Max Weber and became dyadic only at a later stage when land came to be owned by individuals.

Jajmani Relations

While jajmani relations may represent a later development in the Hindi region, the same does not hold good for raiyatwari areas where land is owned by individual households with the result that relations between landowners and their clients are necessarily dyadic. Thus in villages in princely Mysore, landowners paid their client castes in agreed upon quantities of grain, and it was known as 'adade'. Similar arrangements obtained in the non-zamindari areas of Telugu country where it was known as 'marey'. But even in raiyatwari areas there were a few functionaries who served the entire village and they were rewarded with grants of land. They

included a few temple priests and village servants. The last mentioned hailed from the scheduled castes and their official duties included assisting the village headman and accountant in the collection of land revenue, their caste duties required them to beat traditional drums at festivals of village deities, sweeping the village after a collective feast, and removing the carcasses of dead animals. These caste duties are increasingly looked upon as a symbol of oppression and resistance is building up to the performing of them.

I discuss Mayers' argument in some detail because it was about jajmani but I must make clear that the issue of whether the services are performed for individual landowners, or for the entire village, is really irrelevant to my central thesis. However, what is of vital concern to me is that money was used minimally, service and labour were rewarded with grain, or grain producing land and economic relations were an integral part of more inclusive bonds. Production was local, subsistence oriented, and occurred in a hierarchical framework.

From Status to Contract

I am convinced that this system which has endured for over two thousand years is on its way out. I am confident that production will become freed from jati based division of labour, economic relations will become autonomous, and grain payments will be replaced by cash. Indian rural society will move, or is moving, from status to contract.

The replacement of the traditional, grain-based subsistence economy bound up inextricably with castewise division of labour, happened over a period of nearly two hundred years beginning with the establishment of British rule in India which brought a host of new technologies, ushered in new institutions, and radically transformed some old ones. Modern knowledge, the ideal of equity of human beings before the law, democracy, and human dignity were a few of the new ideas. What is perhaps even more important, after India became independent in 1947, the new government of India pursued with determination the goals of democracy, equality of all citizens before the law and, in turn, the goals of development and social justice. The single most important engine of India's social revolution has been democracy based on adult franchise [Srinivas 1996].

New technologies and their products are transforming the lives of villagers in India. I shall confine myself to the changes that have occurred since 1950 though their roots go back to the latter half of the

nineteenth century. Some changes are easily seen and I shall begin with them.

Edible oil is now mass produced in factories and they have rendered defunct the old oil presser and his bullock drawn wooden press. Plastic and aluminum vessels have replaced mud pots and pans and urban textiles have marginalised hand-made cloth which survives in areas where weavers have formed cooperatives. Factory produced tiles are becoming popular and driving out traditional tiles made by local tilers. Sugar is replacing locally produced gur though in this case gur continues to be used as a sweetener for some favoured Indian dishes. Big wooden wheels fashioned by village wheelrights are giving way to much smaller factory-made wheels with rubber tyres – at least in the more prosperous agricultural areas. The barber and the washerman, two essential service castes, have had to change their working styles. The use of the safety razor is reducing the barber's work while the washerman has been forced to use detergents and soaps and to abandon his traditional and inefficient methods of washing. Both barber and washerman are paid cash for their services instead of annual payments in grain.

The effects of these changes which began with what has been called the 'green revolution' in the Punjab in the late 1960s have been far more profound and wide ranging. The 'green revolution' began with Punjab farmers growing high-yielding varieties of wheat and gradually the use of high staples such as rice, bajra, jawar, maize, and ragi, and to vegetables, and fruits. The new agriculture required farmers to change the methods and techniques drastically. The new crops needed a continuous supply of water, the intensive use of fertilisers and pesticides and frequent weeding. Success in the new agriculture called for not only a mastery of the new techniques, but free access to fertilisers, pesticides and credit. While rich farmers were able to commandeer all the resources including labour, poor farmers found themselves at a great disadvantage. Lacking access to quality seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, water, and credit, they found to their utter dismay that the cultivation of hybrid seeds had rendered their knowledge of traditional methods of cultivation totally useless. The suicide of several cotton farmers in Karnataka in 1999 reveals the negative side of the agricultural revolution.

The 'green revolution' has been followed by a 'white revolution' giving rise to a tremendous spurt in milk production and other dairy products. There was also a sharp increase in the production of eggs,

poultry, and fish, all of which have resulted in changes in the food habits of the urban middle classes and the richer peasantry in villages. Rural prosperity during the last three decades accompanied as it has been by increased prices of foodgrains has led to rural wages going up sharply. A new class of tractor owners has emerged in the more prosperous rural areas who hire out their vehicles to farmers for ploughing. Tractor ploughing renders bullocks redundant, and if this trend becomes widespread there will be a decline in the use of cattle for agricultural and draught purposes.

A new feature of village life is the emigration of large numbers of people both seasonally and on a long-term basis. Prosperous agricultural areas are attracting labourers from poorer areas. The migration of large numbers of labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa during harvest time in Punjab and Haryana is well known. But less spectral seasonal migrations do occur from poorer to more prosperous areas all over the country. Fast growing cities also attract migrants from rural areas. The construction industry, garment and other factories, restaurants, and domestic services, all act as magnets as the rapid proliferation of the urban slums settlement testifies. Rapid population growth and the breakdown of the jajmani system are some of the 'push' factors for emigration. All in all, migration is now accepted in rural areas as a fact of life, and the development of roads and communications and ever expanding urban frontiers have facilitated this phenomenon. All in all, the social and mental space of villagers have increased considerably.

Weakening Link

In a word, the improvement of communication, the spread of education, a host of governmental policies favouring the weaker sections, political mobilisation of the people, and the many technological changes referred to above have all had the effect of greatly weakening the link between jati and traditional occupations. Even where it lingers in an attenuated form, monetisation, and market forces have combined to free economic relations from the baggage which they have traditionally carried.

In addition to the technological and institutional changes, new ideas of democracy, equality and individual self-respect are contributing to altering the nature of social relationships. This is evident in the behaviour of members of the so-called 'lower' castes and dalits towards the higher. It is not an exaggeration to state that the

higher castes in general resent the 'uppity' behaviour of the 'lower' castes and the concessions and benefits conferred on the latter by the policy of affirmative action adopted by the central and state governments. Resentment is however greatest with dalits and tribals since they enjoy special representation in all legislatures from village panchayats to parliament. Where dalits are organised politically they refuse to perform chores which they consider degrading and this has provoked the wrath of the locally dominant castes who have traditionally exploited and humiliated them. Clashes between assertive dalits and aggressive dominants are likely to increase greatly in the immediate future giving rise to bloody conflicts in innumerable villages. What is tragic is there is no attempt on the part of those in power to anticipate and prevent such conflicts. Since it is unrealistic to expect dalits everywhere to escape into the anonymity of cities, nothing less than the planned rebuilding of villages which deliberately violate the time-honoured architectural tradition of caste ghettos will prevent rural violence and ensure the physical and psychological safety of the dalits.

Buddhism and Jainism

It is necessary to reiterate that an ideological attack on hierarchy, however widely supported, is unable to alter the ground realities, unless it is backed up by creating an alternative system of production that ignores if not deliberately violates the jati based division of labour. For, contrary to widespread belief, anti-brahmanical and anti-hierarchical movements did exist in pre-British India but they failed to bring about an end to the caste system. For instance, quite early in the history of India, in the sixth century BC, both Buddhism and Jainism rejected Brahmanical claims to supremacy over the others. According to GS Ghurye; "both Buddhism and Jainism appear to me to be movements started by Kshatriyas of exceptional ability preaching a new philosophy which was utilised by their immediate followers for asserting the social supremacy of the Kshatriyas over the Brahmins" [Ghurye 1994:69]. D D Kosambi has written that Buddhist scriptures "...argue against Brahmin pretensions and specialised ritual with consummate skill but in simplest words. Caste may exist as a social distinction, but it has no permanence, no inner justification" [Kosambi 1970:113].

Both Buddhism and Jainism in their origins were protest movements against not only the Brahmanical claims to superiority

but also against the Brahmanical predilection to perform elaborate sacrifices involving the killing of animals, in the course of propitiating their many gods. Buddhism emphasised the importance of right thoughts and conduct (the eightfold path) while Jainism made non-killing ('ahimsa') central to the faith. Both were non theistic sects, and both anti-brahmin. A third strand that was within Hinduism, organised in the south-western part of the Gangetic region ('madhya desa') took a theistic turn, first in favour of Shiva and later in favour of Krishna Vasudeva. All this happened in the early post-Vedic years, and it was this third strand that the Brahmins, presumably thrown on the defensive by the Buddhist and Jain attacks, made their own and developed. According to Govind Prasad Upadhyay, "it is, however, to be noted that the traditions of the eastern region crystallised in Jainism and Buddhism and that of theistic Bhagavatism of the west developed independent of the orthodox culture, but both of them differed in their relations with the Vedic culture. The heterodox east revolted against Vedism, but the theistic character of Bhagavath was congenial to the orthodox aspirations. Although some degree of tension between Vedism and Bhagavatism cannot be ruled out, the Brahmins adopted the system for revitalising the Vedic orthodoxy which was encountering the challenge posed by heterodox cults" [Upadhyay 1979:33].

According to Louis Dumont, the idea of 'ahimsa' was propounded by the renouncers or sanyasi, whom he regards as the creative forces in Hinduism, and this became a central idea of the Jains. The bloody sacrifice of animals during the performance of elaborate and complicated ritual over which the Brahmins had a monopoly coupled with Brahmanical claims to being gods on earth led to the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism, both of which were the creations of the Kshatriyas. Brahmins responded to the new challenge by hijacking 'ahimsa' abandoning animal sacrifice and declaring the cow 'avadhya' or unkillable [Dumont 1970]. Another strand of the strategy was the adoption of the emerging theistic trend and supporting it as against the heretical sects of Buddhism and Jainism. It is from this theistic strand that the Bhagavad Gita emerged which became the fountainhead of the later Bhakti movement which incorporated within itself anti-hierarchical and anti-ritualistic elements which over the centuries encompassed every region of India. The Gita emphasising faith and love of god in the form of Krishna was enough to earn salvation and also simplified and

internalised the notion of sacrifice declaring that a leaf or flower offered with devotion was enough for Him. Implicit in this was a criticism of the elaborate ritualism and bloody animal sacrifice.

Bhakti Movement

While Jainism and Buddhism both started out as protest sects non-theistic in character and rejecting brahminical claims to supremacy, the Bhakti movement grew from within the Hindu fold, and was characterised by a strong anti-hierarchical and anti-ritualistic stand, using local language as against Sanskrit, and was monotheistic in orientation. It surfaced first in the Tamil country during the seventh to tenth centuries AD encompassing both Shiva and Vishnu in their various manifestations. The Bhakti saints came from all the castes and both the sexes. Thus the Shaivite hagiology of Tamil Nadu included Nandanar, a dalit, Appar, a Vellala, and Sambunder, a Brahmin. The Veerashaiva movement of Karnataka initiated by Basavanna in the 12th century had saints from a variety of castes. This was indeed true of the Bhakti movement all over the country. Among the woman saints were Andal of Tamil country, Meerabai in Rajasthan, and Akkamahadevi in Karnataka. The Bhakti movement gave the hope of salvation to millions of people from among low caste groups and women. The Brahmin was ridiculed for his preoccupation with ritual, and purity and impurity; and his claims to supremacy. The Bhakti saints proclaimed that a non-intellectual love of god was all that mattered.

But powerful as these movements were, they failed to make a dent on caste hierarchy, for at the village level, the system of production of foodgrains and other necessities was inextricably bound up with a caste-based division of labour. The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and Brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was inextricably bound up with jati. It was only with the establishment of British rule and the many forces it let loose that the idea of an alternative system of production not based on caste emerged, and this acquired salience in the first few decades of the 20th century. The post-independence years have brought the country closer to a system of local production freed from a caste-based division of labour. It is the government of independent India which mounted a determined comprehensive and sustained attack on the institution and set in motion a programme

of development which culminated in smashing the link between caste and traditional occupation. The jajmani system is beginning to disintegrate. In its disappearance lie the true seeds of equality.

But the paradox is that while caste as a system is dead or dying, individual castes are thriving. In my 1957 address to the Anthropology and Archaeology section of the Indian Science Congress in Calcutta, I pointed out that since the 1920s castes have organised themselves to obtain representation in the provincial legislatures. This phenomenon became strengthened in the 1930s, and after independence political leaders discovered that people could be mobilised on the basis of caste, ethnicity and religion, and this has resulted in what I called 'horizontal stretch' of caste. In fact what are called castes today are more accurately described as congeries of agnate sub-castes which have come together to compete more effectively with other similar formations for better access to such scarce political resources as political power, economic opportunities, government jobs and professional education. With competition getting more difficult, even ruthless, the 'horizontal stretch' is more stretch than 'horizontal', for discrete caste groups find it convenient to come together and assume new names. I cannot go into this in detail but I content myself with reiterating that while caste as a system is dead, individual castes are flourishing. And on the positive side the idea of hierarchy has lost legitimacy both at the all-India and at the state levels. What is more viable, especially in urban areas, is the idea of difference. Differences are articulated and the articulation is bound up with questions of group identity. There is considerable differentiation, economic, social, and cultural, within each caste, though it is far more visible among the higher, and the dominant castes, than among the others. But every caste is differentiated. Furthermore, secularisation has made strides in India such that ritual is usually confined to home, temple and pilgrimage.

Pull of Middle Classes

Linked to all this is the phenomenon of the middle classes of urban India. While the middle class is primarily urban, and it is dominated largely by the upper, and dominant castes, and elite sections of minorities and ethnic groups, all sections of Indian society are represented within it, thanks to the spread of education, and massive affirmative action policies by the state. There are different levels within the middle class, but once members of any caste

group reach even the lower levels, they aspire to and work for the higher levels.

Thanks to the fact that dominant landed castes are represented in politics, bureaucracy and other professions, the middle class has reached the rural hinterland. Maruti cars, two-wheelers, cycles, and colour televisions are no longer just an urban phenomenon. Consumerism is an important characteristic of the middle classes and it is spreading to other sections of society. The urge to become part of the middle class is now widespread, cutting across religion, language, and caste. Upwardly mobile families or sections of castes want very much to become part of the middle class and once this happens, education, professions, and lifestyle, become indicators of status putting caste in the background. And it is among the middle classes that marriages are increasingly crossing traditional barriers of all sorts. Young people are found announcing with pride that their parents belong to different castes or even different ethnic and religious groups. Colleges, work places, conferences, athletic meets and places of entertainment have become places where friendships are formed between men and women, often culminating in marriage. The cultural gap between generations is widening, with the result that parents often cannot, and do not, control the lives of their offspring. The latter have more freedom than their parents ever aspired to. Among the middle classes, similarity of education, lifestyle and proximity, are becoming increasingly more important than caste in forming friendships, and marriages. It is true that this is currently mainly confined to the middle classes but they are over 200 million strong, and are a model for the rest. As the middle class gets bigger, caste will get less important in selecting life partners.

A massive assault on mass poverty plus rapid economic growth will be the best dissolvers of caste identities. Membership of the middle class seems to provide a solvent to the caste divisiveness. In the large-scale embourgeoisement of its people seems to lie the dissolution of caste identities, even as politicians are busy trying to preserve every kind of divisiveness to keep themselves in power.

The situation may be summed up by saying that a variety of forces are bringing about the destruction of the caste-based system of production in the villages and at the local level. The system served India well for two millennia, but it is giving way. On the other hand, individual castes are competing with each other for access to secular benefits. The conflict is likely to become sharper. India's revolution seems destined

to be a slow, bleeding one, largely unrecognised by the middle classes in urban areas.

The Bhakti movement of medieval India was really pan-Indian attracting a large number of men and women from the lower orders and it even crossed the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims as with Kabir and, much later, Shirdi Sai Baba. But the tragedy or the irony of the Bhakti Movement was that it not only failed to make a dent on caste hierarchy but actually ended up by becoming a caste, or worse, a series of castes, palely imitating the master system of jati.

The moral to be drawn is that an ideological attack on caste which is not backed up or underpinned by a mode of social production ignoring or violating caste-based division of labour, is totally inadequate. A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions, based on new principles, and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time in order to uproot the caste system. **EPW**

[This paper was delivered as a talk by M N Srinivas in November 1999 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore. Since he passed away soon after, the paper was not published. Some thoughts are therefore not elaborated upon. Srinivas did not think that the paper was ready for publication. Here it appears as it was found. The paper has been jointly prepared for publication by Tulasi Srinivas, Harvard University, and Lakshmi Srinivas, Wellesley College.]

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