

## Caste and the Frontiers of Post-Colonial Capital Accumulation

(Abstract)

Ranabir Samaddar and Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay

Historical debates have a quaint air to them. As soon as they lose political relevance, which may or may not necessarily mean any intrinsic worth to a debate, they lose their shine. Think of the debate that took place more than thirty years ago in the seventies continuing to mid-eighties of the last century over mode of production in India, particularly in agriculture – whether India was semi-feudal, or semi-colonial semi-feudal or capitalist or retarded capitalist, something that must strike you is the scarcity of references to caste as a particular factor in shaping the mode of production. Yet today it is not difficult to recognize that caste works as an axis of post-colonial capitalism. Therefore there is the need to now theorise the ways in which agrarian capital or capital in the rural hinterland is influenced by caste and influences caste dynamics. Equally there is now a need to study the overwhelming presence of caste as a predicating factor in shaping the destiny of rural labour as agrarian labour or as surplus population absorbed in various forms of petty production, or as a reserve army of labour, or simply forming the vast army of footloose labour in the country. The relative absence of caste as a critical factor in a discussion on post-colonial political economy is stunning.

Partly the reason is with the categories which our discussants were working with at that time. With received categories they attempted to work out the implications of the dynamics they were studying – green revolution, mechanisation of agriculture, form of rent, form of wage, impact of grain trade on production, mode of investment in agriculture, etc. In this connection we may advance three tentative reasons for which caste was relatively absent in post-colonial political economy:

First, in this exercise there was little scope for an organisational analysis – in other words how the labour market is organised, or for that matter capital market. In other words we were not attentive to the organisational and structural process of accumulation in the countryside. But this should not have been so. This is because at the same time we were getting enriched with studies on the interface of caste and capital formation in trade and production, discussions on merchant castes, bonded castes - let us say a specific merchant banking caste like the Chettiar. We had studies of (for instance by David Rudner) of the interdependence among Indian business practice, social organization, religion, impact of colonial rule on indigenous commercial systems, and the inextricable links through formal and informal institutions between caste, commerce, production, and wealth. Practices crucial to the formation and distribution of capital also formed part of the study of the links, which could include factors like marriage alliance, status hierarchy, and related rational conduct of business. And remarkably these studies were suggesting ways to study caste and agrarian labour and rural labour in general.

Second, we were neglecting what Charles Tilly termed as durable inequality, which would mean the organizational factors determining patterns of employment, purchase, investment, etc. We can say that race, caste, gender, or tribe – all these constitute various aspects of the organization of society in which homogenizing tendencies like accumulation, equality, etc. have to operate. Inequalities endure, because for instance, civil rights legislation addresses only the situation in which a hiring boss, or committee, employs or promotes one person but not another in a formal system of straight competition. But as Tilly said, if we change the story, like this: We have a large grocery store where there are different departments - one of them meat, the other vegetables. It turns out that women move into the vegetables and the men into the meat. At entry level they are paid the same. No discrimination. Walking about the store the men

go to places where they can talk to other men and swap stories about football. Women go to places where there are other women and they can swap stories about prices of vegetables, or children's school fees, etc. But promotion structures work differentially so that managers mainly come from the meat department. There is no point at which you have two candidates, one of them male, one of them female. No discrimination at point of entry; or even promotion. But what you get over time is an invisible structure which is, in effect, discriminatory. Therefore what is needed is again to learn about linkages between enclaves and ghettos, about networks, trust stocks, and about migrations. So it is the process, no need to go to the economics professor or to Walmart or the Imperial Chemicals to know all these. So if we have to know the particularity of the dynamics in which caste works as a factor in accumulation we have to inquire the process in which some castes stream into some occupations and some into other. The answer is in the processes of self-reproduction. The phenomenon of "opportunity hoarding", makes the dynamics of social mobility uneven. Overall social mobility has not changed much, and the possibility of moving from the agrarian sector into the elite meanwhile has diminished drastically. What is "opportunity hoarding"? It operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that it considers valuable, renewable, supportive of the network, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi, and thus subject to monopolistic control. "Opportunity hoarding" thus makes inequality durable. The concept allows insights into inter-group dynamics, race, ethnicity, identity, which include national units also in this inter-group dynamics. Economics rarely combines identity and interest; it takes into account only the latter. History emphasises mostly the former. Tilly wanted to give us an approach based on a combination. The implications of this approach, I suggest, is deeper. Tilly said large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances". In this case we have two elementary forms: *types of social relations* and *inequality-generating mechanisms*. We can see how a combination of these two elements leads us to an organizational analysis of inequality, organizational view of heterogeneity-generating mechanisms. Thus although historical accumulations of institutions, social relations and shared understandings produce differences in the day-to-day operation of various sorts of categories (gender, race, citizenship, and so on) as well as differences in various sorts of outcomes (e.g. landed wealth versus cash income), ultimately interactions of exploitation and opportunity hoarding explain them all.

Third, to grasp the relation between caste and accumulation, we have to use the notion of frontier in the way Bailey had long back used the word in his study of caste and the economic frontier. There Bailey had analyzed changes in the internal organization of a comparatively isolated village in the hilly section of eastern India, as a result of what he termed as the extension of the economic and administrative frontier, producing contacts qualified by caste, government policies, and the fact that the village studied by him consisted mainly of Hindu colonists in a predominantly non-Hindu tribal area. What is interesting in this is not the suggestion of a modernization thesis, which was there and is banal now, but the way the frontier of economy works in society. Think of the frontiers of accumulation, you will see how the multiple axes work. Caste is in fact the grease for the accumulation machine. The way low castes had their different destinies in districts and villages of West Bengal and Bihar shows how the accumulation machine works.

Now let me correct a bit to what was said in the first paragraph. It is not that caste was absent in the discussion. The presence of caste was evidence that India was semi-feudal; the erosion of caste was evidence that India was capitalist. Nothing of the two, caste was simply sublimated in the political economy of post-colonial capitalist accumulation.