

'Caste Today'

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Thank you very much for the kind introduction.

I am very honoured to be with you today because Kolkata Port Trust is an institution which has a great reputation. I grew up in this city and I have known about Port Trust since my school days. It is a great honour and a great distinction for me to participate in the celebration of your Anniversary.

I recognize that we are running a little late but I am trying to be disciplined in my use of time and see that I make up for some of the time we lost by beginning the programme a little later than scheduled. When I was asked to deliver this Anniversary Lecture, I was a little perplexed because I was not quite sure that I was the right person to deliver a lecture to the audience of this kind and so what I did was to ask for time. I said, "Well I don't think I will be able to deliver this year, but perhaps next year", hoping that authorities of Port Trust would forget all about it. But they didn't; they came back to me and so here I am with you.

I also gave some thought to the choice of the subject for this morning's lecture. It would be completely beyond my ability to talk to you about the constitution and the

reform of the Port Trust about which I know very little. So I thought that I would choose a topic which might be of some interest to the more general public and I decided to talk to you about "Caste Today", its present significance in Indian society. Now, as it was indicated in my introduction, I have, in fact, written books on caste. In the 50s' and 60s' and into the 70s', caste was the subject of academic interest, not necessarily a subject of very wide public interest. Today, I think it has become a subject of public interest and I would like to give some thought as to how this has happened. How a subject, whose study was confined to a rather specialized group of academics in the field of social anthropology and sociology, has now captured the public imagination. What does it indicate about the changes in our society and the changes in our perceptions of where the Indian society is moving. Now I realize that India is a very large country with a tremendous amount of diversity. If I were speaking to an audience of this kind, let's say, in Bangalore or in Patna or even in Delhi, I don't think that I would need to spend too much time to justify the choice of topic on the subject of caste. But about Kolkata I am not absolutely sure if the enlightened public here spends all that much time, talking about caste and its various implications.

As a student of the society, I have been struck very much about the change in perceptions that have come about since 1977. I think the year 1977, was a kind of watershed in the public attention that began to be paid increasingly to caste and its operations in public life. Today, it is a subject, which receives an enormous amount of attention from the media, both print and electronic. As you go back to the newspapers of the 50s' and 60s' and even the 70s', you will not find caste receiving the kind of attention that it receives in the newspapers, in the popular magazines and particularly on television. People talk endlessly about, for instance, 'caste bias' in education and employment and this has arrested the attention of the people and has

become a source of increasing debate as to how far does caste bias prevail in the admission of students or in the appointment of the faculties in our Universities and Centres of Advanced Studies. How far or to what extent are the admissions and appointments in such institutions like IITs and All India Institute of Medical Sciences governed by the caste bias, and to what extent are the operations of everyday activities in these institutes, governed by caste considerations. How far does caste enter into the actual operation of what goes on in the Indian Institutes of Technology, in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, in the University of Delhi ?

When I go back to my own experience of the Delhi School of Economics and the University of Delhi in general, to which I came as a young lecturer in the year 1959, the subject of caste was considered rather boring, particularly by my colleagues in the Department of Economics, who believed that caste belonged to India's past, not to India's future ; and when I talked about caste with these people, they felt that it was a subject of highly specialized interest with which, intelligent people, who were concerned with the transformation of Indian society, should not pre-occupy themselves too much. I had many discussions and arguments with my colleagues in the Delhi School of Economics, going back to the late 50s', 60s' and the 70s'. Today this is very widely discussed in the University of Delhi. I spent five years in Delhi in one of the premier Halls of Residence, and there the people did not bother very much about caste, unless they happened to be anthropologists or sociologists. But today, if you go to Delhi University and ask about admissions and whether the admissions are transparent or fixed, within five minutes, you will come to the point, where people will tell you that all of this is, in fact, done in terms of caste. Caste is very important in the operation of our public institutions, whether in education or in employment. I don't know to what extent this is actually true. My sense is, that caste bias certainly exists even in our premier public institutions, though this tends to be somewhat exaggerated by the media. But we should not shut

our eyes to the existence of caste bias in our public institutions, whether in regard to education or in employment. Then the media are full of reports about caste conflicts, including violent ones, in the villages, towns and sometimes even in the cities. Now, as I said, India is a very large country and you may not hear reports about caste conflicts equally from all parts of the country. But there are many parts in the country, where, in fact, these conflicts are reported in the daily press. Now, it might happen that caste conflicts prevailed, even in the past but they were not reported as frequently in the press as they are done now.

When one is talking about electoral politics in most parts of India, the caste equation figures very much in electoral calculations. This is what which keeps the subject of caste alive in the media and in public debate and in public discussions and I do want to emphasise that something has changed. It may not have changed in all parts of the country, but something has changed in our public discourse and we should take note of this change. Whether this change, in fact, reflects a hardening or strengthening of caste is a separate question to which I will devote most of my talk this morning. But certainly, the perception that caste is important has become much more widespread among the intelligentsia, the academics, the journalists and among people who write about public affairs and that is certainly the case. I have found myself in a rather odd position as a social anthropologist who began by taking an academic interest in caste and was derided by some of my progressive friends, particularly in the profession of economics for taking so much interest in what they considered to be a 'reactionary' subject; because, their feeling was, in the 50s' and 60s', if you are interested in the roots of inequality and conflicts in Indian society, then you should look to 'class' and not to 'caste'. But the same people who tended to dismiss caste as an epiphenomenon, as the matter of the superstructure, rather than as being at the heart of inequality and conflict in Indian society, have now turned with

new interest and tended to put caste at the centre of attention. Now, certainly if one goes by what one reads in the media or what one sees on television, one will have to admit that caste is still very much here. And this perception of the Indian society is very different, from the same that the forward looking and progressive Indians had in the wake of independence. Certainly they believed in Nehru's India that caste was on its way out; rather than becoming progressively stronger with the passage of time.

It's not that everybody subscribed to the general optimism that caste was on its way out and that it would soon be a thing of the past. There were exceptions and I will draw attention to one or two of them, whose writings, even in the 50s, drew attention to the fact that caste was very much a part of the Indian reality in post independence era. And this point was made very forcefully by a person who dominated sociological studies in India in the second half of the 20th Century. He is M.N. Srinivas. He, in his presidential address to the Anthropology & Archeology Section of the Indian Science Congress, here in the city Calcutta, in December, 1957 argued that we have not seen the last of the caste system and that it was still alive and kicking and we better take note of it. And I remember, there was an editorial in the Times of India commenting on that Presidential Address. The editorial commented that this is very greatly exaggerated, this is something which is dying out and the eminent social anthropologist was bringing it back to life. And I remember the response to Srinivasan's views in the Indian Statistical Institute where I had my first job. People tended to deride this preoccupation with caste, in a similar vein, when I talked to economists in the Delhi School of Economics in 1959. The economists, with whom one discussed these issues, whether it was Shri K.N. Raj, P.N.Dhar or V.M. Dandekar, were inclined to argue that this was not something which we should worry too much about.

Now the question I would want to ask myself is that, were these distinguished economists, academics, journalists who believed that caste was in decline, completely deluded? Were they unable to see what was going on in the Indian society? Frankly, I don't think they were wholly deluded, and I would explain why. Because there are many areas of social life in this country in which there is a secular trend of decline in the significance of caste and I would like to say a few things about this secular trend of decline in many areas of our social life. And again, I would pick out three areas and argue that there is substantial evidence that caste is in decline in all these three fields of social life or action. Although, of course, this decline is not uniform across all the regions of the country. But nevertheless, if you take India as a whole, the pace of the decline may be faster in some areas than in the others, the evidence may be more pronounced in certain areas than others; but I think over-all, one will have to concede that the evidence does corroborate that caste has been steadily in decline in three of the most significant areas of social life where it held forte until the end of the 19th Century. And I would run through these three areas very quickly before I come back to the question with which I started, viz., why has it become the subject of such great public attention if it is a fact that it is in decline in all the areas which were earlier considered to be important to caste, at the end of the 19th Century, and even at the time of independence.

Now, what are the three areas? First, is the area of religion and ritual. Second, is the area of inter-marriage and third is the area of the association with the caste and occupation.

Today when people talk about the increasing strength of caste in public life, they are not talking about the increasing hold of caste rituals over the social life of Indians. In the rural areas, may be, caste continues to have a certain hold in the ritual practices. But I have neither found any argument nor any evidence, which

says that the ritual aspects of caste are becoming stronger even in the rural areas. They may say that they are still very much there, they haven't weakened very much. But nobody, as far as I know, no sociologists or social anthropologists or students of society have argued that the ritual aspects of caste are becoming reinforced. Yet, if you look at the literature on caste till the time of independence, much of it, in fact, highlights the importance of ritual observation of purity and pollution, as the basis of the divisions and hierarchies of caste; particularly, the writings of civil servants and missionaries and also of a large number of Indians, drew attention to the great strength of the opposition of purity and pollution as a basis for hierarchies of caste. Particularly, in the writings of colonial civil servants, whether you take Edward Blunt or J.H.Hutton, there are pages of description of the details of the ritual life and ritual hierarchies which kept the caste system intact.

For instance, the rules for the interchange of food and water. What kind of food is acceptable from whom? From which caste, water is acceptable and on this issue, there are enormous ritual variations. For instance, in eastern India, including Bengal, one test of hierarchy of caste is from whose hands the upper castes accept the water and castes are classified in terms of whether the water is acceptable from them by the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Baidyas. That's one major test and accounts of the caste system dwell on this aspect of it in great detail. This is not something which was conjured up by one or two anthropologists with a strong imagination, (although I must say that some of the discussions of the ritual restrictions on caste, seem so exaggerated as to be not altogether feasible). For instance, there are detailed accounts, particularly in South India about the physical distances that different castes had to maintain from each other, depending on the ritual status in the hierarchy. You know, the Nayars could approach within 16 ft of the Namboodris, Tiaks could approach within 64ft and Bhumihars could not approach beyond 128 ft. This was the stereo-typed account of what people thought about the structure. But

they gave a good idea of what people considered to be the basis for the maintenance of social distances and relations, social inclusion and exclusion in Indian society upto the 1940s and the 1950s - which was a very important aspect of the caste system. I don't think that there is any doubt that this has been weakening steadily and there has been a secular trend of decline in the ritual basis of caste. And the inequality of these practices which were considered orthodox and necessary for maintenance of the caste system, began to appear not only obsolete but even ridiculous.

I had a friend in St.Xavier's College, who was the best student in my class and he came from Bhatpara and they were Vaidic Bramhins. He used to tell me that his father's great ambition was to be an engineer, but to be an engineer, you had to study in BE College and you had to live in the hostel of BE College and his grand parents or the family would not allow my friend's father to do that. So he had to come to Presidency College by train and go back home. So these kinds of practices were already appearing ridiculous in the 30s', 40s' and 50s'. But this was a very important basis, which held the system together and maintained its gradations and its practices of inclusion and exclusion. The practice of untouchability, however, continues. I won't say that it has disappeared. But I would say that the ritual aspects of the practice of untouchability are no longer as prominent but that doesn't necessary mean that everything is positive because, as I put it, the practice of untouchability in the traditional ritual sense of the term is being replaced by the practice of atrocities against untouchability. And that is a very different kind of thing. Practice of atrocities about which we read in the newspapers, are very much in vogue against the Dalits in many parts of the country. It's a very different thing from the practice of social exclusion through the operation of ritual rules.

I have seen this change in my own eyes in a village in Tanjore district which is the citadel of Brahmanical orthodoxy; when I lived in the Brahmin dominated

quarters of the village known as Agraharam. I found my way to the Agraharam, though how I managed to do that is a different story. I used to be there; there was a clear residential segregation in these villages during the time, I am talking, say, about the period in 1961-62. There is a part of the village which is known as the Agraharam, where only the Brahmins lived and until then, no non-Brahmins lived there. At the other extreme you had, what you would call, the Cheris who were the Dalits, the Adi-Dravidas and the Harijans. In between, there was the area where the non-Brahmins lived. Now I lived in one of the Brahmin houses; in the evenings, occasionally, I would hear someone shouting by the name 'Swami'. Swami is the standard term for address of a Brahmin, and for that matter, any Brahmin is a Swami. And 40 or 45 years ago, you could identify a Brahmin by his appearance, by how he dressed etc ; and I used to wonder, who is calling whom? And I decided to investigate. And I was told that it was the Harijan tenant or share-cropper, who had come to deliver the grain to his landlord and he cannot enter the 'Brahmin' street. So he has to come through the backdoor. The backdoor was often shut. So he shouts so that somebody can go and open the backdoor and he can deposit the grain and go away and I thought this was all extremely interesting; I must say, at that time, at least my view was not that of a moralist but of a sociologist, and I wanted to understand the logic of this system.

What really struck me as interesting, was the fact that after the school was over, everyday, the children would rush through the Agraharam because the school was at the bottom of the Agraharam and then I decided to investigate as to whether there were any Harijan children near the Agraharam, and I found that, of course, there were. But their fathers, their elders would not venture to pass through the Agraharam. It is not simply that they would be penalized/ punished if they did it but they would not do it as per social practice. My Brahmin friend, the landlord, was an educated man and we used to go out to a near-by town, just near the village and have a cup

of coffee and we would sit in a 'payal' (a 'rock' in Bengali parlance). My friend, who was an Iyengar Brahmin, had a cow which he was very fond of. There was a special kind of leaf called 'Atigiri' which he liked to feed his cow from time to time. So when he sat there, he would see someone from the village, anybody's servant for that matter, and, incidentally, a Dalit could always be identified by his appearance. He would call the person, throw some money, say 10 paise or something like that and ask him to buy some 'Atigiri' and deliver it at the backdoor. And he always threw the coin at this man; and since my friend was an educated, enlightened man and although I had gone there in a spirit of detachment, one day I told him indignantly, 'why do you do this? Can't you give him the money? Why throw it at him? He has to pick it up from the road!'. He laughed at me, saying, " Oh ! I see, I see ! I will give you the money and tomorrow you'll give it to him." I was also identified as a Brahmin, by my appearance, by my company, and was asked to give him the money. That's what I tried to do, the next day ; I called the man and held out the money. And he just stepped back refusing to take the money from my hand!

All this has changed and this, I believe is also an important and a secular trend of change. I have no doubt whatsoever that what was once considered to be absolutely crucial to the functioning of caste system is now in complete or almost disarray; not so much in the rural areas, and in fact, there are orthodox persons at North and South India who would think five times before employing a Harijan woman as a cook or even before allowing him to use the kitchen. But I think this trend/direction of change is quite clear. May we now turn to another very important area?

If you look at the older literature on caste, there are three areas on which various anthropologists and sociologists have concentrated or focused their attention. One of these was the ritual of pollution and purity, the second was marriage; and they said that the real heart of the caste system lay on the marriage,

the rules and restrictions on marriage. Of course, they were very extensive and very elaborate. I won't say that the rules of caste endogamy have disappeared. I think that marriage is one area in which people look to match caste with caste. I have known quite a number of very liberal, highly educated, even left oriented intellectuals who said that caste does not exist in Indian society any more, but when they are looking for a bride or a groom, they are quite aware of the caste of the person. But while that is there, there are also changes.

I would draw attention to two or three kinds of changes. One is that the rules or restrictions on marriage or the rules of the marriage within the caste system were not simple. They were quite elaborate and complex. We tend to think of the rules of caste marriage only in terms of the rules of endogamy i.e, when one marries within one's own caste. But that was not the only rule that prevailed; there was also the rule of hypergamy which in Sanskrit, is known as Anuloma, i.e, a man of a superior caste may marry a woman of lower caste; but, never the other way round. Anuloma was allowed but never Protiloma. Anuloma is sanctioned ; Anuloma is considered to be necessary, is socially deemed to be quite in order. But not Protiloma. And rules of hypergamy were very widely practised. We, the Brahmins to which community my maternal ancestors belonged, were notorious for the practice of Anuloma. And that enabled the men to accumulate larger number of wives and along with that they could also accumulate large sums in dowry. Now inter-caste marriages do take place and I would explain in what way, but the point is that the inter caste marriages did take place even in the past but according to certain very specific rules, viz., that the man had to be of superior caste and the woman of inferior caste. Today when inter caste marriages take place or when that is allowed, and tolerated, people do not want to find out, whether it is Anuloma or it is Protiloma. And inter caste marriage today is truly an 'inter caste' marriage. And I have tested this way with my own students, in Delhi University, students from this city of Calcutta. They are mainly

upper-caste Brahmin girls, I would ask them from time to time, " *Tomader barite Anulom biye hoyeche*" ? *Protilom biye hoyeche*" ? And they don't know the meanings of these words. These words have lost their meaning and significance. I think that is not unimportant. Are inter-caste marriages taking place ? Yes, but how widespread are they, I don't really know. We don't have reliable or adequate statistics to tell us how widespread inter caste marriages are. But inter caste marriages are taking place. However, even when inter caste marriages do take place, one has to recognize the fact that these marriages were usually between adjacent sub-castes of the same caste.

Let's say the marriage between a Radi bride and a Barendra groom which would be considered improper and unacceptable in my grandmother's generation, is today, merely a marriage within the Brahmin community. Inter caste marriages are also acceptable, provided the distance between the two castes is not very great; let's say that, between Brahmin – Baidya or between Baidya and Kayastha. Inter-caste marriages between them are much more widespread now than that was before. We have very scattered evidence about its prevalence, but the trend, nevertheless, is quite clear that the rules restricting inter-caste marriages are not becoming more stringent, but are becoming more lax. But one must not ignore the fact that if an inter-caste marriage is between an upper-caste man and a dalit woman, then the sanctions are likely to be very swift and not, if it is the other way round; because there is a strong bias for Anuloma in the caste system and strong bias against Protiloma in the caste system. I think that runs very deep in the structure of Indian society. It is not just a matter of caste. The idea that the status of the groom should be superior to the status of the bride is very strong and ingrained in the society. So inter caste marriages are taking place but not necessarily across great structural distances.

But the other important thing which deserves our notice is not simply the frequency of inter caste marriages. One might say that to be one in one thousand, but even that would be quite significant compared to the past. It's not the frequency, but one has to take into account the sanctions against inter caste marriages; because one must ask, even if there are three inter caste marriages, what is the consensus, what is the sanction against inter caste marriages? There were very powerful sanctions of the community against inter caste marriages in the past. These community sanctions have ceased to exist and whatever sanctions are there, are those imposed within the family or the joint family at the most. So, that again, is an important change.

The third area where the caste seems to be weakening and again where there is a secular trend, is in the association between caste and occupation. Whereas there were earlier anthropologists, who either believed that the heart of the caste system lay in the ritual opposition of purity and pollution or in the rules of inter marriage, there were other anthropologists and sociologists who argued that the real foundation of the caste system lay in the association between caste and occupation. I would say that there is still some association between caste and occupation but it is weakening. If one wants to understand, what is the association between caste and occupation, then I think one has to examine it at two different levels.

First of all, there was a very specific association between caste and occupation of the kind which was studied in very great detail by my own teacher, the Late Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose. For instance, he pointed out that among oil pressers, the Telis, there were two or three different sub-castes of Telis and each of these sub-castes practised oil pressing, using their respective techniques. There are oil pressers who use one bullock for running the oil mill and there are those who use two bullocks for running the same. Similarly, for potters and those engaged in other occupations. It is

a kind of monopoly that goes down right to the details of the craft or the service. Now that kind of specific association between caste and occupation is very definitely in retreat because many of those old occupations, crafts and techniques are now dying out. But apart from the specific association between caste and occupation, i.e., a sub-caste pursuing a particular craft in a particular manner, there is also a general association between caste and occupation, i.e, caste belonging to the higher levels, usually practice superior non-manual occupation and castes of lower levels were usually relegated to the inferior, manual and menial occupations and that association is still quite noticeable. It has not yet disappeared, although it has been curbed quite a bit.

Now the factor behind loosening up of the association between caste and occupation is the emergence of a very large number of new caste-free occupations. There are new occupations to which there is no appropriate caste or sub-caste. There are no particular castes or sub-castes, which match the new occupations that are emerging before our eyes at a very rapid rate. So that is another factor, which leads to the weakening of the association between caste and occupation. So, I have been arguing that in three very important areas, caste does seem to be in retreat so that my friends in the Delhi School of Economics like Shri K.N. Raj, Amartya Sen or Sukhomoy Chakraborty, when they were saying that the caste is in decline, it was not altogether an illusion. It was in decline in that sense but why is it that people have acquired a renewed interest in caste? I would say, in conclusion and this is the last point I want to make : if caste has been given a new lease of life in our society, in Indian society, it is the political system which has given it. Srinivas' name was long associated with the idea that the caste is still very strong and is growing stronger ; and his paper, 'Caste in Modern India' which was read as part of the presidential address of the Indian Science Congress and which is still regarded as a landmark,

is a strong pointer to the continuing existence of the caste system and even to its strengthening. It's a very outstanding paper and I have read this paper many times. It has many examples. But every single example Srinivas uses for his argument that the caste is becoming stronger, is in the field of politics. There is not a single example from all the three areas I have just discussed. And these were the three very areas, which seemed to Srinivas' predecessors, who were writing about caste, to be constituting the real source that caste derived its strength from.

There is no doubt at all, and there is no way that we could deny the fact that democratic politics has given a new lease of life to caste by allowing caste to be used as a basis for mobilizing electoral support. And it's a very large subject in itself. This is a worldwide phenomenon. This is what is described as identity politics. It is not only caste; it can be religion, language, or ethnicity. In fact, throughout Eastern and Central Europe, you see the resurgence of identity politics. So, in that sense, caste has been given a new lease of life. So Srinivas was right and so also K.N. Raj was right. So, when K.N. Raj was arguing that the caste is weakening, he had in mind the association between caste and occupation, the very stringent rules restricting inter-caste marriages and the rules regarding ritual inclusion and exclusion; so he was right. But when Srinivas was arguing that caste had been given a new lease of life, he was also right.

Finally, let me say one thing that I came to appreciate the significance of caste in politics in 1961 and 1962 because that was when I was doing my field work in Tanjore District in Tamil Nadu. In 1962 the third General Election was held and I used to move around with my villagers and see how they assessed the chances of various candidates - and I would see that caste was entering as a factor in their calculations -- about who will win and why is a party setting a particular person as one of its candidates. And I came to Delhi and talked about this phenomenon with

people who were then in politics; in fact, if I had more time, I would have talked to you about one of the most fascinating conversations I had with the Late E.M.S. Namboodiripad about the role of caste in the Indian Society. He would, of course, score on me for bringing up the importance of caste in Indian politics. But when you took depth with politicians and asked them that caste after all was useful in mobilizing support in elections and there was no way denying that, they would say, at first, "we don't do it, the other parties do it". And then when you show evidences and point out that their party also does it, they would look bitinglly at you and say "Well Mr. Béteille! This is politics. I am not a professor like you, we have to be realistic. If other parties are using caste, what do you expect of us?"

So the use of caste for mobilizing political support was always justified on pragmatic grounds-- "We have to do it because everyone was doing it". It is here that a change came about in 1977 and in 1990 and I think that this change is very ominous. The use of caste in politics today, is no longer justified only on pragmatic grounds; it is also justified on ideological grounds, by an appeal to social justice, quest for justice. You look at the distribution of resources, whether in education or employment, there is no alternative but to use the loyalties of caste for mobilizing political support and I must say, I may burn my fingers by saying this, but that the left parties are no different from the other parties in justifying the use of caste in identity politics. So, this is where we stand now, and I don't know what the future of caste is.

Of course, people may point out to me that caste was given a new lease of life only by the political process for mobilizing electoral support but I would argue that if there were nothing to it, how could one have used caste for mobilizing political support? The point is not that the people were not conscious of their caste identity; of course they were and this comes up when one talks about marriage. But this consciousness, in my judgment, was weakening and it has been given a new lease

of life. It has been strengthened as a result of a kind of identity politics, which has been particularly in vogue since 1977, but particularly since the Mandal agitations and now, since the aggressive push for quotas in Central Universities and IITs. But again, I must say, in finality, that one must always be very sensitive to regional variations in India. I find it extremely difficult to generalize for the whole of India when I am talking about the power played by caste in politics or in ritual or in inter-marriages in certain parts of the country. There are enormous regional variations, those between rural India and urban India etc. Nevertheless, I think it is a very important subject and I think I wouldn't be much mistaken to hold the view that the Bengali intelligentsia has not taken the importance of caste sufficiently seriously. I think that they should do it and I believe that it is going to be a very important part of political life of India, at least in the next decade or so.

Thank you very much.

The above is the Textual Transcription of the Anniversary Lecture delivered by Prof . André Béteille.