

The Grammar of Caste – Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Ashwini Deshpande looked at “Caste”, her interest areas talk about economics and international economics, her previous work is on “Globalization and Development”, etc. all these are aspects of economics, and now she has chosen the core concept of sociology, i.e. social stratification, Caste in case of India. The shift from economics to sociology is a very interesting factor here. Faced with analyzing persistent underdevelopment in India, the Primary focus of empirical economic research then was on the causes of overall inequality and poverty, and their remedies. Intergroup disparity had just started coming to the fore in shaping the contour of research on inequality. Her belief was that an understanding of group disparities was essential if one wanted to gain a deeper and more nuanced insight into the complex patterns of stratification. She argues that the real key to the degree of change in the caste system is the degree of change in the conditions of those who are its worst sufferers- (ex-) untouchables. As long as the three dimensions of untouchability i.e. exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation- continue to persist, we cannot declare the caste system to be dead.

Key Words – *Caste, Globalization, Economics, Exclusion, Humiliation*

Review of Book

When I got the book for book review, I was shocked after looking at the cover page itself, on the cover page, below the title of book it was written “an outstanding book- Kaushik Basu”, and on the back cover, comments on author’s work and book, were made by eminent scholars and authors, which are Kaushik Basu (Chief Economic Advisor, Government of India and Cornell University), Satish Deshpande (Delhi School of Economics), William Darity Jr. (Duke University), Thomas E. Weisskopf (University of Michigan), Katherine S. Newman (John Hopkins University).

The book after completion got such good response from the great personalities in the academics, made me more excited to read the book. As it is mentioned in cover of book that, “This insightful book is an important step towards a multidisciplinary dialogue for understanding (and mitigating) inequalities based on birth and descent. A must read for social scientists, activists, policymakers, and all those interested in making sense of how caste works in India today.

First thing comes in my mind what made Ashwini Deshpande to look at the “Caste”, her interest areas talks about the economics and international economics, her previous work is on “Globalization and Development”, etc. all these are aspects of economics, and now she is had chosen the core concept of sociology, i.e. social stratification, Caste in case of India. The shift from economics to sociology is very interesting factor here.

The book starts with the dedication, in that “In the Aai’s memory, for Baba”, it shows an emotional attachment of author towards the work, work has been dedicated to the parents.

The book is divided into 7 Chapters which are given below:

1. The Economics of Caste
2. Theories of Discrimination and Caste
3. Mind the Gap
4. Overlapping Identities: Caste and Gender
5. Measuring Discrimination
6. Merit, Mobility and Modernism: Discrimination in Urban Labour Markets
7. What is to be Done?

Now we will look at what is there inside each chapter carefully and separately.

Chapter 1st title is ‘The Economics of Caste’, in this chapter, author tried to look at how caste and economics are related, mostly she connected occupation and caste connections. This chapter is mostly the introduction to the main concept of economic discrimination in contemporary India.

There were weird reactions of the different disciplines of the social sciences, towards the concept when first it was discussed with co-workers and friends by the author. Likely some sociologist and economists asked below questions to the author,

“Sociologists - What can an economic investigation possibly uncover that we do not already know?

Economists – Why Caste? Is that not something sociologists do?”

The empirical economic research, analysing persistent underdevelopment in India, the main focus was on the causes of overall inequality and poverty and their remedies. In shaping the outline of research on inequality, the intergroup difference just started coming in forefront. Author’s belief was that an understanding of group differences was very important, if anyone interested to gain a deeper and nuanced insight into the complex patterns of stratification.

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research on inequality. My belief was that an understanding of group disparities was essential if one wanted to gain a deeper and nuanced insight into the complex patterns of stratification.

The first footnote asks us (reader) to note that “Caste is a feature of all major religions in India, indeed in South Asia.” Here I find that author have tried clear some points like caste is not in one religion, as it was mostly projected like it is in only one religion.

In the first chapter author mainly tells us about how she turned towards this topic and justification of why this concept or say topic is selected, main focus behind this all, is explained in very simple language. Like initially author mentioned this lines in first chapter, where explained why she(author) focuses on the caste, “I focus on caste because of the enduring relevance of caste categories in contemporary India, and due to the presence of caste based affirmative action policies enshrined in Constitution of the country.” Why explaining this all she raises few important questions which can be seen as the research questions. She mentioned in between some authors and their writings and studies done few scholars earlier.

What contribution can economists make?

Constitution guarantees each Indian the freedom of choice of occupations. Thus, without fear of contradiction, one can uphold this statement for several castes, for example, members of the erstwhile warrior castes will not necessarily choose the military as a career in the present. Conversely, the military is no longer the preserve of certain castes, to the exclusion of others. It is also true that any kind of skill acquisition (for example admission to a management or a computer course, or to a dental school) is not contingent upon one’s caste status. Indeed, none of the modern occupations are determined by birth and most are not caste based.

In between the author have asked questions like “why the link breaks for some caste – is it the pull of economic opportunities or the ‘push’ of economic deprivation that compels caste members to seek alternative occupations?”

There is discussion on the gender-caste overlap, how the responsibility of preserving traditional occupations often falls on the women while the men seek alternative employment. Or, is it the case that members of stigmatised, disadvantaged castes end up becoming successful entrepreneurs?

A rigorous economic investigation into the caste composition of the occupational structure can help derive an objective, larger picture of the nature and degree of change.

Author quotes Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who is an outstanding theoretician of caste, to outline the caste and class distinction. Author called the caste as “a static 3000 year old immutable dinosaur”.

After that she quote Dirks (2003:5) argues that,

“Caste (as we know today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is specifically, the product of a historical encounter between India and western colonial rule... It was under the British that

caste became single term capable of expressing, organizing and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community and organization... In short, colonialism made caste what it is today.”

The arguments concerning about the role of the British state apparatus in shaping caste identities into a fixed format are compelling; however, the writings of D. D. Kosambi, Jotirao Phule and most of all, Ambedkar very firmly establish the reality of the caste system predating the British, admittedly more fluid and less rigid than what the British imagined it to be. Also the relationship between the colonial rule and caste system has many dimensions, some of which have been discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the British quest to view it as a system of racial divisions; the liberating role of colonial rule in that it provided the untouchables access to English language education, and so forth.

So, overall, the impact of the British rule on the caste system is complex and multi-dimensional, and this book touches on some aspects of this complicated relationship.

After that author Ashwini Deshpande discussed (Ir)relevance of caste?, in this she mentioned the work done Sociologist M. N. Shrinivas and called him one of the titans of Indian sociology and one of the most significant contributors to the study of caste. According to her, Shrinivas argues that the subsistence economy of rural India, dependent on the jati-based division of labour, is the ‘essence of caste’ and he suggests that, ‘the 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 extent of each of these changes is empirically verifiable and prima facie this statement seems to be a fairly accurate description of the system of production. However, in what exact ways this has altered the workings of the caste system needs to be studied.

She also mentioned after that, “What is astonishing is the extent of untouchability that is still continues to be practised in the country, even in urban settings, despite its abolition after Independence, the bulk of which is unreported and goes unpublished. Caste-based matrimonial alliances continue to be more the rule than exception, even among otherwise westernized, modern, apparently caste-blind youth. The agitations against caste based reservations in education and employment that are predominantly urban-based, display a very high level of caste consciousness and use overtly casteist slogans and acts of protest, thus putting a question mark on the supposed ‘castelessness’ of urban India.

Shah (2006; 15) documents untouchability in rural India, based on the results of an extensive survey carried out over 2001-02 in 565 villages across 11 states. They find that untouchability is not only present all over rural India, but it has ‘survived by adapting to new socio-economic realities and taking on new and insidious forms’. The extra-judicial power that caste panchayats exercise, particularly in the domain of inter-caste romantic/matrimonial alliances, is additional proof of the lasting relevance of caste. It also gives considerable ground for pessimism, if abolition of caste is at all a goal. In the battle between and modern legislation, the latter might never win, although at the time of writing, there seems to be some

movement towards trimming the tentacles of notorious and dreaded *khap* panchayats in Haryana that routinely award death sentence to all those who flout the caste norms for marriage. Politics, of course, is inextricably intertwined with issues around caste identities and there is no reason to believe that the two will be dissociated any time soon.

According to Author, evidences points that there is more relevance of caste categories rather than to its increasing irrelevance. So, it will not be exaggeration to argue that caste remains a powerful and potent force in Indian Society, decisively shaping the outline borders of social and political development.

She argues that, the real key to the degree of change in the caste system is the degree of change in the conditions of those who are its worst sufferers- (ex-) untouchables. As long as the three dimensions of untouchability i.e. exclusion, humiliation and exploitation- continue to persist, we cannot declare the caste system to be dead.

The author is making claim in this book is the economic investigation is not only alone can capture the innumerable expressions of caste, but simply that it can provide crucial insights the material aspects of disparity and into the degree of change in the caste and occupation nexus and help in outlining the contours of discrimination in the modern Indian economy. There is a belief that, though volume is focusing on subset issues related with caste, related to caste and economy, it should make potentially useful intervention in policy debates, such as that over affirmative action.

Conclusion

The book is divided into seven main chapters,

- i. Economics of Caste,
- ii. Theories of Discrimination and Caste
- iii. Mind The Gap
- iv. Overlapping the Identities: Caste and Gender
- v. Measuring Discrimination
- vi. Merit, Mobility and Modernism: Discrimination in Urban Labour Markets
- vii. What is to be done?

The first chapter mainly focusing on how economists view the caste, what made to write the book or we can say the introduction to economics and caste. Then Chapter 2 is completely about summarization and critical discussion on the few economic theories that specifically investigate how social identity can impact economic outcomes and why we might encounter discrimination in market settings. Chapter 3 outlines contours of caste disparity in modern, contemporary India, and the evidence that seriously questions the belief that caste is irrelevant in globalizing India, author presented the evidence spread over the last 20 years, using the largest two data sets after the national census on variety of indicators of material well being. Author have constructed a multifaceted 'Caste Development Index' (CDI) that

allows a broader assessment of standard of living of caste groups than what a narrow focus on consumption would allow. One can use this index to compare a caste group across states or time, and the gap between CDI values across the caste groups can serve as a measure of disparity. Chapter 4 reports the evidence on the changing nature of overlapping of caste and gender disparities. It also reports on the evidence on women's autonomy and decision making ability within the household and on domestic violence, based on two rounds of large survey. Examining data on indicators of material standard of living (aggregated across the 'Gender-Caste- Development Index') along with that on autonomy reveals an interesting recent development: that several of disadvantaged castes, as a part of 'Sanskritization', seem to have adopted greater constraints on women as a part of their efforts to emulate upper-caste behaviour. Thus, recent evidence suggests that trade off is vanishing and women from castes lowest in the hierarchy are trapped in a cesspool of poverty, deprivation, and reduced autonomy.

Chapter 5 is based on the question of how the economists define the discrimination and how it can be measured in labour market. It should be noted that while the quantitative estimation of labour market discrimination is based on Gary Becker's theory of 'taste for discrimination', now all the empirically inclined researchers (whether economists or sociologists) use these methods. The primary method is called the 'decomposition method' and is fully explained in this chapter. The critiques to this method is also discussed in this chapter and also examines the additional new techniques, such as correspondence and audit studies, which are being used to gauge the extent of discriminatory attitudes and their manifestations during economic interactions. Clearly there is no perfect technique to measure a problem so complicated; it is interesting and instructive to understand the various methods that are continuously being evolved. It turns out that together these methods throw up a whole body of very rich and insightful literature that illustrates the pathways through which discrimination manifests itself.

Chapter 6 which title is 'Merit, Mobility and Modernism: Discrimination in Urban Labour Markets'. In this chapter author mostly talks about the research studies in which she was involved and how this studies are connected with modernity, merit and affirmative action. The chapter focus on the discrimination in urban labour market.

In this chapter, first research study discussed was, 'a study of urban, formal sector labour markets, conducted by Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (2005-2007), it was designed by a team of Princeton University. This study had four components; one, the larger, macro picture, decomposing the wage gap between caste groups in urban labour markets, based on the largest all India data set (Madheswaran and Attewell 2007). This study established that a significant part of the wage gap was due to discrimination; when all wage earning characteristics are controlled for; there is still a residual, unexplained gap in wage earnings that can be taken to be a measure of discrimination.

The second research study conducted in Delhi, where fake resumes were sent to different private sector employers. Several matching sets of resumes were sent where everything was identical, except the caste and religious identity of the applicant. The call backs from the companies were then analysed to test whether employers distinguish between identically skilled or equally meritorious candidates on the basis of their identity. It turned out that social or group identity does matter, even when there is no significant difference in the qualifications of the applicant (Thorat and Attewell 2007).

The third research study was a college to work study (Deshpande and Newman 2007) where a group of students who are graduated from three elite universities in Delhi. These cohorts of students were similarly qualified and received the same quality of education; thus, from the point of view of the labour market, embodied similar 'merit'. In this research study, a baseline survey of students (graduating) was done and it was about their expectations from labour market and their notions about ideal jobs. The students were tracked for two years with periodic follow up by interviews and their experiences in labour market and jobs finally they landed, were documented.

The most of respondents went to private sector and then the process through which they got selected as revealed by follow-up interviews and the result was that social identity (Caste or Religion) ends up shaping the final outcome in the labour market.

The fourth study was discussed is survey of private sector employers attitude. In this what the private sector employers in formal, modern sector look for when they are hiring. This study confirms the findings of the other three studies. Result was that employers talk the language of merit and confess that they have a deep faith in merit of the applicant; they also believe that merit is distributed along the lines of caste, religious, and gender divisions. They nowhere see this as discrimination; it is as if they were describing a neutral and unbiased state of the world. The chapter 6 presents a picture of discrimination in urban labour markets.

In the Chapter 7, author had a discussion on the Indian Affirmative Action (AA) programme, which primarily takes the form of caste based quotas. However AA need not be quota based and indeed there are many forms that AA takes across the world and known by different nomenclature; affirmative action (The US and Northern Ireland); positive action (UK), employment equity (Canada), Black empowerment (South Africa), reservation (India), preferences (Malaysia), and so forth. In this chapter author talks about the 'Diversity Index', which is an index to measure and increase representation in public spaces, especially of minority groups. This index was designed to measure the diversity across the several dimensions; caste, gender and religion, in the sphere of education, employment and housing. This index can be seen as an alternative form of AA, which avoids the somewhat mechanical features of the quota system. However, the operationalization of the index is not yet on the policy agenda.

Finally the book does not contain the overarching conclusions, other than to suggest that a multifaceted dialogue geared towards ending inequalities based on birth and descent needs to be forged urgently. This book is an effort to link the politics, sociology and history with the

economics of caste. This is very important in order to move forward in the contemporary times. I find this book is very useful for the students and researches who want to study and do research in the area of caste and social exclusion. This book can be seen as sample how to look at different societal problems with researches and evidences, where we can come up with a completely new knowledge which will reduces the chaos happening due to ignorance of many things. This book gives motivation to reader to look for new perspectives and think from different angles to the same problems, and come up with new answers.

References

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