1. Introduction

Caste as a system of social stratification remains an important aspect in the lives of many peoples throughout the world. Dimensions of caste are found in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and even North America. Yet, it is India that stands out among nations as the most notable in terms of caste stratification today. Although elements of the caste system, such as untouchability, were outlawed over 50 years ago by the Indian constitution, caste remains an obvious feature of rural Indian society. Indeed, among laypeople and social scientists (e.g. Ferrante 2000, Henslin 2003) the concept of caste is still largely synonymous with India.

One of the most significant functions of the Indian caste system, of course, is its hierarchical distribution of power. Yet, in this respect, the Indian caste system may be at a turning point at the dawn of the new millennium. Modern forces such as urban migration, mass communication, transportation, consumerism and education are influencing the power structures within village India in complex ways. This study, based on ethnographic research conducted in villages of Western Maharashtra, explores the changing face of power within the rural India caste system.

In particular, it documents changes within the microcosm of village India that have been brought on by contemporary processes of modernization.

2. Theorizing Social Change

For centuries, social philosophers have tried to understand and explain processes of social change. Questions concerning social change gave
rise to the discipline of sociology in the 19th century, and the causes and consequences of social change remain at the heart of sociology today.

For the purpose of this study, social change refers to any “significant alteration of social structure and cultural patterns through time” (Harper 1998: 4). This definition is useful in that it points to both the socio-structural and psycho-cultural dimensions of social change (Ross 1993). The distinction allows one to focus on distinct but related aspects of social life. Social structures refer to political, economic, and legal structures, as well as other social institutions, arrangements, and organizational principles that have observable existence outside of the human mind. Culture, on the other hand, refers here to the shared attitudes, values, and beliefs – or interior structures of human consciousness – that are acquired and transmitted through processes of social learning and that characterize a people and their way of life.

Some scholars, in their analysis of change, tend to focus on the psychology of the individuals within a population without due consideration of the structural forces that mold and define the consciousness of those individuals. In the field of communication and development for example, both Lerner and Rogers are criticized for failing to consider the socio-structural dynamics in their psycho-cultural characterization of the problem of stimulating development (Grunig 1971).

More common in sociology, however, is a tendency to focus on external social structures as the primary determinant of social change, without due attention to the culturally determined structures of human consciousness that in part generate and sustain those social structures. Yet clearly, psychological states affect social structures even as social structures affect psychological states. Social status distinctions, for instance, can be understood as subjective psycho-cultural constructs that reside in the interior of the human mind. At the same time, social status distinctions can also be embedded in external social structures – such as a caste system – where they become an objectively observable social reality. Moreover, these psycho-cultural and socio-structural expressions are mutually informing. Each generates and reinforces the other in a dialectical manner.

In this context, social change can be defined as a significant alteration in either, or more likely both, of these dimensions. Each exist in a state of
potential flux and, in the long run, both are continually remolding and reshaping one another. To understand social change, therefore, one must appreciate the complex and often subtle interaction between socio-structural and psycho-cultural forces.

3. Traditional Power Structures in Rural India

Power within traditional village India was, to a significant degree, ordered around caste. The caste system of stratification was based on heredity and endogamy, and was relatively permanent in that one was generally born, lived, worked, married and died within one’s own caste. Mobility was virtually nonexistent, and inequalities as a result of this system in India were often extreme. Beteille defines caste as:

a system of enduring groups whose mutual relations are governed by certain broad principles. Castes as enduring groups can be located with relative ease, since they are named and have fairly well defined boundaries. The principles, which govern these mutual relations, however, are complex in nature (1996, 3: 4).

Caste is thus, first and foremost, a system of stratification in which the status of the individual is determined by his birth and ritual purity.

At the time of India’s independence when untouchability was constitutionally outlawed (though not effectively abolished), social scientists attempted to understand the agrarian society that made up the bulk of India’s 500 million people. Srinivas asserted that rural peasant society was organized and structured around a single dominant caste, which exercised control over a village. He saw the dominant caste not as the class with the highest ritual status but as the one that “preponderates numerically over the other castes, and (...) wields preponderant economic and political power” (1955: 8). He acknowledged, however, that this caste “can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low” (ibid). Scholars such as Dumont (1970) subsequently argued that dominance was based more on economic realities than numerical preponderance. Other scholars (e.g. Cohn 1955, Dube 1968, Mandelsohn 1993) in turn argued that the notion of a single dominant caste may have been applicable in the past, but the
factionalism that exists within contemporary castes and the fluid nature of current land ownership limits the usefulness of this notion today.

As the analysis below indicates, the role and function of caste in village life is indeed complicated today. Its role within the power structures of village society is changing as the sources of power and authority change. The questions this raises are: How has the role and function of caste changed in contemporary village life? What is the relationship of caste today to the power structures of village society? How is caste linked to other sources of power and authority? And what forces are affecting these linkages?

4. Village Society at Century’s End

To the casual observer the mountain villages of Western Maharashtra continues, in many ways, to resemble life over 50 years ago when the country gained its independence from the British. Small hamlets surrounded by rice paddies are nestled against the mountainside, with huts made of mud, stone and thatch, and dirt roads and pathways winding through the village. Most homes have no indoor plumbing, and residents continue to use wood and dried cow dung as a source of fuel for cooking. Yet some significant material and technological changes have also occurred over the past five decades. Likewise, many of the traditional social, political and economic institutions and structures that governed and ordered the cultural life of these villages have undergone significant change in this relatively short time period.

Early in India’s independence, leaders believed that roads and electricity were the most important material developments that the government could provide its people, and unlike so many other parts of the world most villages in India today have access to both.

Road construction connects villages to towns and cities enabling its inhabitants to export their goods and labor and bring in cultural and economic elements from the outside. Cash crop production increased dramatically once peasants were able to get their crops to larger markets. This move toward a cash-based economy has had a significant impact on village society that for centuries was based on subsistence agrarian economies. Migration to the cities and larger villages for work
has also increased substantially in the past 30 years, resulting in many other changes in rural India.

Against the backdrop of these changes, the Maratha caste numerically dominates the smaller villages throughout the Ghats of Western Maharashtra. Larger villages, however, are often multi-caste. Raj Puri, a multi-caste village with a population close to 4,280 is representative of the midsize villages of this region. It remains a farming community, but the majority of its working adults hold full-time or part-time jobs in the nearby town of Panchgani. Children commute to town for school, and many villagers have strong social and political ties to the town. A bus leaves the village four times a day for the short trip into Panchgani.

Within the village of Raj Puri, many villagers own mopeds, bicycles, and a few own and operate taxis. Many also have access to latrines, to gas burning stoves, and to piped water close to home. Most have access to education if they so desire, and all have access to electricity. Along with electricity has come access to television. Through television, many villagers are now exposed to a larger national culture along with increasingly global cultural influences. Most significantly, the introduction of television has meant that access to many forms of knowledge and information is less strictly tied to caste. In only a decade television has largely dismantled the monopoly of information that was the standard for centuries (Johnson 2000).

As a consequence of these developments in communication and transportation, Raj Puri and similar villages are now intricately tied to the larger economy of the region as well as to the psycho-cultural and socio-structural changes that are occurring throughout India (and the world). One result of these wider linkages is that most young people in villages like Raj Puri do not see their future in the village, and the traditional role that the caste system played in determining one’s life chances has thus been significantly undermined.

5.Transitions of Power and Authority in Raj Puri

In its broadest sense, power refers simply to capacity – or the capacity to accomplish desired goals and outcomes (e.g. Giddens 1984 : 15, 257). In a narrower sense, social scientists typically use the term power to denote
the capacity of one person or group to dominate another. Weber, in this regard, refers to power as the ability of a person or a group to realize their will even against the resistance of others (1958:180).

A further distinction is often made between the concepts of power and authority, with the latter being narrower in scope (e.g. Beteille 1996). Authority, in this sense, refers to power that is legitimized and operates within an institutional framework. For example, in parts of rural India, the village Sarpanch (headman/Chief) has a certain amount of authority, which the people of the village have invested in him. Likewise, the village Patil (policeman) wields authority over conflicts within the community. A large landowner on the other hand, may have a certain amount of power, which he might use to influence individuals or groups, but he has no legal authority.

Within the Indian caste system, both power and authority were traditionally determined by the position of one's caste within the caste hierarchy. Over the past several decades, however, there has occurred a significant shift in the bases of power within village India. These shifts have greatly influenced the means by which power is achieved and maintained and have significantly altered the role and function of caste in peasant society.

Historically, village society in Deccan Maharashtra was clearly hierarchical. It consisted of three major groupings: (1) a dominant class of cultivating landowners who usually belonged to upper castes such as Brahmins and Marathas; (2) a subordinate class of individuals belonging to the lowest castes (considered untouchable) who acted as village servants, performing the menial and ritually polluting tasks essential to the community, and paid by revenue-exempt tenure on village lands; and (3) a group of artisans who provided services to the village as a whole for which they were paid by revenue-exempt tenancy on village lands (Dandekar 1986, Attwood 1992).

The Marathas fit Srinivas' categorization of the dominant caste among the peasantry in Maharashtra. They were the traditional land-holding elite, and though ranking lower than Brahmins, acted as the community leaders. According to Attwood, the Marathas were:

known for their cooperatives and politics, that is, in enterprises which depend on organizing public support. Unlike their
counterparts in Gujurat, they are not known for their business skills, nor for migrating to other regions in pursuit of commercial profit (1992 : 294).

Raj Puri, located in Wai taluka within the district of Satara was historically, and remains today, the stronghold and heartland of the Maratha peasantry (Sirsikar 1970 : 40). According to Gadgil (1948b), this region of Western Maharashtra had for centuries been dominated by the Maratha caste, and it was this peasantry who were responsible for the power wielded by the Marathas at the state level.

In the initial period after independence from Great Britain, the Brahmins managed briefly to control the political leadership at the state level in Maharashtra. However, for most of the last half century the Marathas, who constitute approximately 40 percent of the total population, have led state politics. According to Karve and Damle, who have written extensively on village Maharashtra, the Marathas, "though neither educationally advanced nor wealthy, have always been conscious of themselves as a fighting and a ruling class" (1963 : 156). In addition to their power at the state level, the Marathas dominate the leadership positions within the village and within the elected Panchayat Raj institutions. To quote Sirsikar, ‘the Marathas have numerical strength, economic and political power, and ritual status on their side’ (1970 : 24). All this plus the historical positions of power occupied by the Marathas "combine to give to this caste group a very dominating position in the political and social life of Maharashtra, especially in the rural areas" (ibid. : 25). This triple Maratha monopoly (caste, class and political party) distinguishes Maharashtra as unique within the Indian Union.

In order to break free from the rigid caste hierarchy, the Mahars, the large untouchable caste within this region, collectively converted to Buddhism several decades ago and pursued a path of education in order to achieve greater degrees of individual and social emancipation. As Atwood explains, however, “their status as a small minority with little land prevented them from gaining political or economic power in the countryside” (1992 : 99). Having little or no land to make a living in the villages and few opportunities with little political influence, many Mahars migrated en mass to the urban centers and towns, where they not only “found better opportunities through education and urban employment”, but some went on to “express their frustration with the caste system by founding the Dalit Panther movement” (ibid. : 99).
Panchgani, a regional town, thus has a substantial Mahar population that is employed throughout the town in varying capacities. Meanwhile, the village of Raj Puri also continues to have a Mahar population, but most work what little land they have in the village while also commuting to jobs in Panchgani. This group has made great inroads into the sphere of commerce and various professions because of their belief in education. Federal and State legislation has also created opportunities for lower castes such as the Mahars to enter the civil service.

As a result of these accomplishments, the rigidity of the caste structure in Maharashtra has been loosened. One of the clearest indications of this is the erosion of barriers that traditionally segregated and insulated members of distinct castes, both socially and occupationally. As Srinivas has pointed out, many features of “village life tend[ed] to insulate castes from each other: endogamy, the ban on commensality, the existence of occupational specialization, distinctive cultural traditions, separate caste courts, and the concepts of pollution, \textit{karma} and \textit{dharma}” (1994 : 94). However, these traditional forms of insulation and segregation are now eroding on many fronts, including traditional occupational barriers, traditional attitudes toward endogamy, and traditional measures of social status.

\textit{6.Occupational Barriers}

The system of occupational specialization according to caste is much less pronounced today than it was historically. The availability of occupations other than those specified by one’s caste allow villagers to move out of their hereditary occupation and pursue new forms of work and employment. Access to education, migration to towns and cities and an increasingly diversified cash-based economy all serve to challenge the traditional occupational structure.

Raj Puri, like most other villages in Maharashtra, is largely agrarian, and land ownership continues to be an important variable that influences the distribution of power and the assignment of authority. In recent years however, income from off-farm employment, and conditions of one’s work as well as access to material possessions have become important contributory variables that require analysis.
Raj Puri, like so many other villages, has been propelled into the global capitalist economy. The village is linked with the larger society in terms of trade, migration for employment, and communication. Villagers grow cash crops for sale in the cities. Hybrid strawberries developed in California are now one of the major cash crops of the village.

Wealthy landlords who once cornered the business activities of the community are no longer able to wield such power. The village economy continues to diversify, allowing people from all segments of the community to take part in the buying and selling of land. The Mahar population has been able to purchase more and more land with cash accumulated from off-farm employment in cities and towns.

The mass media is another important development in the village that has transformed the monopoly of knowledge and information by the upper castes, and thus affected the occupational opportunities of the lower castes. For instance, the media inform members of the community about agricultural developments and other economic and financial opportunities, and are thus increasingly playing a significant role in restructuring power relations in the village.

Another outcome of exposure to mass media is the increasing displacement of a subsistence ideology with a consumerist ideology in rural India. Through increased exposure to the global capitalist economy, villagers are wanting and demanding more in terms of material developments, consumer products and a general style of life that was inconceivable only 30 years ago. The fatalism that was once the hallmark of traditional Hindu Caste culture has all but disappeared – with significant implications for the caste system itself.

7. Attitudes toward Endogamy

There can be no rigid social hierarchy if people marry outside their own groups. Therefore, the caste system mandates that people marry within their own group, thus ensuring that their children are not mixed. Endogamy, maintained through a system of arranged marriage, has been the tradition in rural India for centuries. Though the practice of endogamy is still strong in rural India today, perceptions and attitudes
toward endogamy appear to be changing, along with the perception and practice of arranged marriage.

In Raj Puri there were a few cases in which people had married outside of their jati but not their varna (note 1). On several occasions, villages claimed that marriages were also occurring outside of one’s varna. When asked, however, to identify those villagers who had done so, the answer invariably was: “Oh, not here... in Panchgani there are many, but not here in Raj Puri”. Furthermore, though the attitude toward endogamy has changed significantly, with people becoming open to the idea of marriage outside of one’s varna, not one respondent though could accept the possibility of a Mahar (an untouchable) marrying a Brahmin of the priestly caste. This was seen as too drastic and the Brahmins still too insulated for this possibility to be acceptable to either the Brahmin or the Mahar.

On the other hand, perceptions and practices regarding arranged marriage are clearly beginning to change. Courtship, dating and falling in love prior to marriage used to be foreign to village India. Families negotiated a dowry, often with the help of a matchmaker, and their sons and daughters had little say in the process. Today, however, with transportation, migration and modernizing influences of mass media, the idea of “love marriage” is beginning to take hold. It is not uncommon for young men to articulate their preference to find and fall in love with a girl before marriage. Hindi movies and television programs depict this on a regular basis, and more and more young people are verbalizing their preference in a spouse. Yet, despite this professed preference, of 18 marriages between 1988-1996 in Raj Puri only one was considered a “love marriage”. The couple, both of whom were from the village, do not live in the village any longer and have migrated to Pune.

8. Social Status

The transition of power and influence within village life from a system based on ascription to one based on achievement is most apparent today. Though hereditary status is still an important force in village life, knowledge and practical application of knowledge has become an essential measure of social status. Education, knowledge, networking and access to material resources are all important elements that contribute to
one’s position in the social hierarchy. With a move toward a cash-based economy the interactions among and between groups has shifted. One’s ritual purity is now less important than the Rupee, which dictates most economic interactions. Caste no longer prohibits people from doing business with one another, and the Mahar population of Raj Puri often interacts with Marathas and occasionally even Brahmins through, for example, cooperatives and trade. Cooperatives are well developed in this part of the country, and though they are still governed by caste membership to some degree, there are numerous examples where one’s financial position weighed more heavily on cooperative membership than caste did.

Women’s status and authority has also evolved within village life. Delayed marriage and the desire for fewer children has given women a higher degree of autonomy. The education of the girl child has become more and more a reality over time, with girls and women today advancing to higher levels of educational status. The preference among young men for educated women is also apparent, encouraging families to keep their daughters in school past the 8th grade, with many going on to finish the 10th standard government board exams. Education for girls increases their worth, which in turn lessens the dowry expected from the families that they marry into. Television and mass media in general have also brought new ideas and values to the rural culture that are beginning to take hold in some aspects of household life. Men are often seen doing household chores that were once the sole responsibility of women. Women continue to do the vast majority of household work, but there is evidence of men doing more.

On a related note, change can also be seen in the increasing control that women exercise in the area of reproductive choice and planning – which again relates to their changing social status. In this regard, Caldwell et al. (1988) identified three areas which most influenced reproductive/demographic change in their study of villages in southern India. These included education, politicians visiting rural settings, and contact with urban life and values through media. Data from Raj Puri overwhelmingly supported these findings. The role of the media and education were critical in the change in attitude and behavior toward fertility. This trend has opened opportunities for young women that their mothers did not have. Postponing early marriage childbearing has allowed women to pursue education and vocational training that gives them a certain amount of financial independence from off-farm
employment, which in turn gives them access to material resources and thus power in the long-term.

9. A Note on Media and the “Information Underclass”

While the modernizing processes that are taking hold within the village and reordering the traditional power structures of the community are benefiting some, others are experiencing a weakening of position within the hierarchy. One of the primary factors in this regard is access, or lack of access, to media of mass communication such as radio and television. As the discussion in each of the three previous sections suggests, television alone is having an impact on features of village life as diverse as occupational opportunities, marriage, and social status – including the status of women.

Radio and television can provide useful knowledge and information, as well as exposure to outside values, attitudes, and beliefs. Traditionally, access to knowledge and information was confined largely to higher castes, while values, attitudes, and beliefs were formed almost entirely within the matrix of the caste system. In both of these respects, the introduction of mass media has significantly undermined the traditional caste system in rural India.

Yet access to television is not universal within villages such as Raj Puri. As the arrival of television and other forms of mass communication are enhancing the status of those who have access to its information and knowledge, those who do not have access are experiencing a weakening of their status, making them “more disadvantaged than before” (Johnson 2001 : 160). This is the information underclass in contemporary rural India. And with the inevitable expansion of the Internet throughout rural India in the future, this divide is likely to increase rather than decrease – at least in the short run.

10. Conclusion

From a holistic standpoint, the change that is occurring within the cultural life of the village community in rural India is creating a new social order
based on a restructuring of power and authority. The forces and processes of urban migration, education, and mass communication are all contributing factors to this process. Caste, once an all-important determinant of one’s position in the social hierarchy, is today gradually being undermined. Shifting patterns of educational achievement, material well being, access to knowledge and information, and access to political and influential leaders are all significant factors determining the redistribution of power and authority within communities.

Though caste remains a clear feature of village life, the caste system is undergoing notable changes – especially with regards to its traditional ability to structure power and authority within communities. The view that caste continues to have a complete and firm grip on rural life has become untenable and reflects an oversimplified view of a complex socio-political reality. On the other hand, the view that caste has been largely displaced by other variables such as class, education, and family is equally simplistic. The truth lies somewhere in between. In a rapidly changing society, caste remains an important factor in the socio-political life of changing rural communities. Economic change, political pragmatism, competitiveness, restructuring of ritual status and mobility, the introduction of new mass media, and the rising spirit of consumerism have all created a new social environment within the village that is quite different from the past. If one is to understand village society today, one must examine the complex interplay between all of these socio-structural and psycho-cultural forces within village life.

11. Notes

1 India’s four main castes, or varnas, are subdivided into thousands of specialized subcastes, or jati, with each jati assigned a specific occupation. See appendix A for a further description of caste occupations.

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13. Appendix

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