



Changing Caste Relations in Urban India: Continuity and Transformation in the Existing Context

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Abstract

Caste remains an important dimension of Indian social structure, even as urbanisation, education, occupational mobility, and economic transformation have reshaped traditional social relations. This study examines the changing nature of caste relations in urban India by focusing on the processes of continuity and transformation in the contemporary context. It explores how migration, modern employment, educational opportunities, inter-caste interaction, and changing lifestyles have influenced caste identity and social relationships. Particular attention is given to caste-based networks, marriage preferences, residential patterns, occupational mobility, political participation, and experiences of social discrimination. The study also examines whether urbanisation has weakened traditional caste boundaries or reproduced them in new forms through social networks, economic inequalities, and cultural practices. By analysing the interaction between traditional caste identities and emerging urban values, the study seeks to understand the complex and multidimensional nature of caste relations in contemporary India. The study highlights that caste is transforming rather than disappearing within urban society.

Keywords: Caste Relations, Urban India, Urbanisation, Social Change, Caste Identity, Social Mobility, Inter-Caste Relations, Social Inequality

1.1 Introduction

Caste has historically constituted one of the most significant systems of social stratification in Indian society. It has influenced social identity, status, occupation, marriage, patterns of interaction, access to resources, and political organisation across different historical periods. Although the Indian Constitution established equality before law and prohibited caste-based discrimination, caste continues to shape social experiences and opportunities in contemporary India. The persistence of caste does not necessarily mean that its traditional form has remained unchanged. Rather, caste relations have been influenced by urbanisation, education,



industrialisation, occupational mobility, democratic politics, migration, and economic transformation. Srinivas (1966) observed that processes of social change had already begun transforming traditional caste relations, while Bêteille (1996) argued that modern institutions have altered the relationship between caste, class, and power without completely eliminating caste-based inequalities. In contemporary India, therefore, caste needs to be examined as a changing social institution that demonstrates both continuity and transformation.

The significance of caste in Indian society can be understood through its historical role in organising social relationships and distributing status and responsibilities. Traditionally, caste determined an individual's position within the social hierarchy and influenced the occupations considered appropriate for particular communities. Social interaction, food practices, marriage, and residential arrangements were also frequently regulated through caste boundaries. Dumont (1980) interpreted the traditional caste system primarily through the principle of hierarchy, particularly the opposition between purity and impurity. Although such a conceptualisation has been debated by subsequent scholars, it highlights the ideological foundations through which caste distinctions were historically maintained. Caste was not merely an occupational category but a comprehensive social system that shaped everyday interaction and collective identity. Consequently, changes in occupation or residence do not necessarily result in the complete disappearance of caste consciousness. Instead, caste identities may continue in modified forms through social networks, marriage practices, political mobilisation, and community organisations.

The concept of caste and caste relations is therefore broader than the classification of individuals into particular communities. Caste relations refer to the patterns of interaction, hierarchy, cooperation, competition, exclusion, and negotiation that develop between different caste groups. Traditionally, these relations were structured through rules concerning endogamy, hereditary occupation, social distance, and restrictions on commensality and interaction. However, modern social conditions have weakened several of these restrictions, particularly in urban settings. Srinivas (1952) demonstrated that caste groups could also experience mobility through processes such as Sanskritisation, while later scholarship increasingly highlighted the interaction of caste with class, political power, education, and economic resources. Gupta (2000) argues that caste in modern India cannot simply be understood as an unchanged survival of the traditional system because its meanings and functions have been reconstituted within modern institutions. Thus, contemporary caste relations involve both inherited identities and new forms of social organisation.

The process of urbanisation has significantly influenced these traditional caste structures. Cities bring together individuals from diverse caste, linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds and create spaces such as workplaces, educational institutions, markets, public transport systems, and residential areas where interaction across caste boundaries becomes more frequent. Urban occupational structures also weaken the direct connection between caste and hereditary occupation because individuals increasingly enter professions based on education, skills,



qualifications, and labour-market opportunities. Srinivas (1966) noted that processes associated with modernisation and urbanisation contributed to changes in traditional social structures. Nevertheless, urbanisation does not automatically eliminate caste. Caste networks may continue to influence housing, marriage, employment opportunities, business relationships, and social support. In some urban contexts, caste may become less visible in everyday public interaction while remaining highly significant in private and institutional domains.

The relationship between urbanisation and caste is therefore complex. On the one hand, urban life can weaken traditional forms of social distance by creating opportunities for interaction among different communities. On the other hand, economic inequality and social networks may reproduce caste distinctions through new institutional mechanisms. Residential clustering, for example, may reflect a combination of economic status, cultural preferences, social networks, and discrimination. Similarly, people who migrate to cities may maintain links with caste associations and community organisations because such networks provide assistance in employment, accommodation, marriage, and social welfare. Jodhka (2012) argues that caste has not simply disappeared under conditions of modernisation; instead, it has acquired new forms and meanings. The urban environment can consequently facilitate both the weakening of traditional caste practices and the emergence of new forms of caste-based organisation.

Modernisation and education have also contributed substantially to the transformation of caste relations. Education exposes individuals to principles of equality, individual achievement, constitutional rights, and occupational choice. It can weaken the idea that occupation should necessarily be determined by birth and can encourage social interaction beyond traditional caste boundaries. Educational institutions also bring students from diverse social backgrounds into common spaces, potentially creating new forms of social identity and interaction. However, access to quality education remains unequal, and caste continues to intersect with economic circumstances and social privilege. Desai and Dubey (2012) demonstrate that caste-based inequalities in educational attainment and access have persisted despite significant expansion of educational opportunities. Therefore, education should be viewed as an important mechanism of social transformation but not as an automatic solution to caste inequality.

The contemporary urban context therefore demonstrates an important continuity and transformation of caste identities. Caste identity may become less prominent in certain public interactions while remaining highly significant in marriage, family relationships, community networks, and political mobilisation. Endogamy continues to be an important mechanism through which caste boundaries are reproduced. Even among highly educated and economically successful urban populations, matrimonial preferences frequently remain influenced by caste considerations. At the same time, increasing inter-caste interaction, inter-caste marriages, professional mobility, and individualistic lifestyles have created opportunities for weakening traditional caste boundaries. Caste associations have also adapted to urban conditions by functioning through formal organisations, welfare groups, professional networks, and digital platforms. Thus, the contemporary city does not represent a complete departure from caste



society; instead, it provides a new social environment in which caste identities are negotiated and reconstructed.

The transformation of caste is also closely connected with class formation and economic mobility. In traditional society, caste and social status were strongly interconnected, although economic differences existed within caste groups. Contemporary urban society has witnessed the growth of new middle classes comprising individuals from diverse caste backgrounds. Economic success, professional status, educational achievement, and consumption patterns can now contribute significantly to social identity. Bêteille (1996) points out that caste, class, and power increasingly interact in modern Indian society rather than existing as completely separate structures. This does not mean that caste has become irrelevant; rather, caste operates alongside class and other forms of social differentiation. A person's contemporary social position may therefore reflect an intersection of caste background, economic resources, education, occupation, gender, and political influence.

The political transformation of caste is another important feature of contemporary India. Democratic politics has provided historically marginalised communities with new avenues for political representation, mobilisation, and collective assertion. Caste-based organisations and political movements have contributed to the strengthening of collective identities while simultaneously challenging older forms of social hierarchy. Jaffrelot (2003) demonstrates how the political mobilisation of lower and backward caste groups contributed to significant changes in the distribution of political power in post-independence India. In urban areas, caste associations may similarly function as platforms for community representation, welfare activities, networking, and political mobilisation. Consequently, caste identity can operate not only as a marker of traditional status but also as a source of collective political agency and social assertion.

1.2 Urbanisation and Transformation of Traditional Caste Relations

Urbanisation has emerged as an important force in transforming traditional caste relations in India. The movement of people from rural areas to towns and cities brings individuals from different caste, regional, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds into shared social and economic spaces. Unlike traditional villages, where caste groups often lived within relatively defined social boundaries, urban environments create greater opportunities for interaction in workplaces, educational institutions, markets, public spaces, and residential areas. Migration can therefore weaken some forms of traditional caste distance by exposing individuals to diverse social relationships. However, migrants often continue to maintain caste-based networks for accommodation, employment, marriage, and social support. Thus, urban migration may reduce the visibility of caste in certain public interactions while simultaneously preserving caste identity through community networks (Jodhka, 2012).

One of the important consequences of urbanisation has been the decline of traditional caste-based occupations. Industrialisation, expansion of the service sector, professional education, and labour-market diversification have provided individuals with opportunities to enter occupations that are not necessarily associated with their caste background. Education and individual



qualifications have increasingly become important determinants of occupational mobility. This has weakened the traditional connection between caste and hereditary occupation, although caste-based inequalities in employment opportunities have not disappeared. Thorat and Newman (2010) demonstrate that caste can continue to influence access to employment and markets even within modern economic institutions. Therefore, occupational change represents an important transformation of caste relations, but it does not necessarily eliminate caste-based disadvantage. Educational and occupational mobility have further contributed to changes in caste status and social relationships. Access to higher education, professional employment, government services, business, and new occupations has enabled members of historically disadvantaged communities to achieve greater economic and social mobility. Education can also encourage values of equality, individual achievement, and constitutional rights, thereby challenging traditional assumptions about status based exclusively on birth. However, opportunities for mobility remain uneven because economic resources, social networks, and historical inequalities continue to influence access to quality education and employment (Desai & Dubey, 2012). Consequently, urban India reflects a complex relationship between caste background and emerging forms of class and occupational status.

Urbanisation has also changed patterns of social interaction and community relations. Shared workplaces, educational institutions, public transport, markets, and recreational spaces create opportunities for people from different caste groups to interact more frequently. Such interaction can reduce traditional social distance and encourage relationships based on education, occupation, economic interests, and common urban experiences. At the same time, caste networks remain important in many cities, particularly in matters of marriage, housing, employment, and community support. Caste associations have adapted to urban conditions by functioning as welfare, cultural, professional, and social organisations. Thus, urban community relations increasingly combine caste-based networks with broader forms of social interaction.

Inter-caste interaction is particularly visible in educational institutions, workplaces, and neighbourhoods. Universities and professional institutions bring students from diverse caste backgrounds into common environments, while workplaces require cooperation among individuals irrespective of their caste identities. Urban neighbourhoods can similarly facilitate everyday interaction across caste boundaries. However, the extent of such interaction varies according to income, housing patterns, institutional practices, and social attitudes. Residential segregation, discrimination, and social networks may continue to reproduce caste boundaries even within cities. Therefore, greater physical proximity does not necessarily result in complete social equality.

As a result, contemporary urban India has witnessed the emergence of more flexible forms of caste identity. Caste may be less visible in everyday public interaction but remain important in marriage, political mobilisation, community organisations, and social networks. Individuals may simultaneously identify themselves through caste, occupation, education, class, religion, region, and professional status. Jodhka (2012) argues that caste in modern India has adapted to



changing social conditions rather than simply disappearing. The urban context therefore demonstrates both continuity and transformation: traditional caste practices have weakened in some areas, while caste identity has acquired new forms through political, economic, social, and digital networks. Urbanisation has consequently transformed the ways in which caste is experienced and expressed, without completely removing its influence from contemporary Indian society.

1.3 Caste Identity, Marriage, Networks and Social Mobility

Caste identity continues to remain significant among urban populations despite the expansion of education, occupational mobility, and modern lifestyles. Urbanisation has reduced the visibility of some traditional caste practices, but it has not eliminated caste consciousness. Individuals may increasingly identify themselves through education, occupation, income, and lifestyle, yet caste continues to influence family relationships, marriage, social networks, and political participation. Caste identity can also provide a sense of community and social belonging, particularly for migrants who establish networks with people from similar caste backgrounds. Thus, contemporary urban caste identity is increasingly flexible and multidimensional, combining traditional affiliations with modern social and economic identities (Jodhka, 2012).

Marriage remains one of the strongest mechanisms through which caste identity is reproduced in urban India. Despite greater educational and occupational interaction between different caste groups, many families continue to prefer marriage within their own caste or community. Matrimonial advertisements, marriage bureaus, and increasingly online matrimonial platforms frequently allow individuals and families to search for partners according to caste preferences. This indicates that modern technology has not necessarily weakened caste endogamy; instead, it can provide new platforms through which caste preferences are maintained. At the same time, individual choice and changing attitudes among younger, educated urban populations have created greater acceptance of inter-caste relationships in some sections of society. Consequently, marriage represents an important area where modern aspirations and traditional caste expectations come into direct interaction.

Inter-caste marriage can be regarded as an important indicator of changing caste relations because it challenges the traditional principle of caste endogamy. Increasing education, urban employment, exposure to diverse social groups, and individual autonomy have created opportunities for relationships across caste boundaries. However, inter-caste marriages remain relatively limited compared with the overall number of marriages in India, and couples may face family opposition, social pressure, discrimination, or conflict. The acceptance of inter-caste marriage therefore varies according to education, generation, socio-economic status, region, and family attitudes. While younger urban populations may demonstrate greater openness towards individual choice, caste continues to influence matrimonial decisions, showing that the transformation of caste relations remains incomplete.

Caste associations and community networks have also adapted to urban conditions. In cities, caste-based organisations may function as welfare associations, cultural bodies, professional



groups, and social networks. They can provide assistance with employment, education, accommodation, marriage, financial support, and community events. Such networks are particularly important for migrants who may lack established social connections in urban environments. At the same time, caste associations can strengthen collective identity and contribute to political mobilisation. Jaffrelot (2003) demonstrates that caste-based collective mobilisation has become an important feature of democratic India. Urban caste associations therefore represent both continuity with traditional community structures and adaptation to modern organisational forms.

Caste networks can also influence employment, business, and social support. Individuals may rely upon community contacts for information about employment opportunities, business partnerships, accommodation, or financial assistance. These networks can provide valuable social capital, particularly where formal institutional support is limited. However, reliance on caste-based networks may also reproduce inequalities by providing some groups with stronger social connections and opportunities than others. Thus, caste can operate simultaneously as a source of support and as a mechanism through which social boundaries are maintained. The contemporary urban economy therefore does not necessarily function independently of caste; rather, caste networks may interact with professional, educational, and economic networks in complex ways.

The relationship between caste and social mobility has also changed considerably. Traditional caste hierarchies linked social status closely to birth, whereas contemporary urban society provides greater opportunities for mobility through education, employment, entrepreneurship, migration, and income. Members of historically disadvantaged communities have achieved significant educational, occupational, and economic advancement through constitutional safeguards, affirmative action, and expanding opportunities. However, economic mobility does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of caste identity or discrimination. A person may experience upward economic mobility while continuing to face caste-based social barriers. Bêteille (1996) argues that caste, class, and power increasingly intersect in modern Indian society, making social stratification more complex than the traditional caste hierarchy.

1.4 Continuity of Caste Inequality and Contemporary Challenges

Despite urbanisation, education, occupational mobility, and modern lifestyles, caste-based inequality continues to influence social relations in contemporary India. Caste-based discrimination and exclusion may no longer always appear in the openly visible forms associated with traditional society, but they can continue through social attitudes, institutional practices, employment opportunities, housing, marriage, and everyday interaction. Urban settings provide greater opportunities for interaction across caste groups, yet experiences of discrimination demonstrate that geographical mobility does not automatically eliminate social hierarchy. Thorat and Newman (2010) show that caste can continue to influence access to economic opportunities even within modern markets. Thus, the transformation of caste should not be interpreted as the complete disappearance of caste-based inequality.



Residential segregation and unequal access to urban resources represent another important dimension of contemporary caste inequality. Although cities bring diverse communities into shared spaces, residential patterns may remain influenced by caste, class, income, and social networks. People may prefer to live near members of their own community because such neighbourhoods provide familiarity, security, social support, and cultural continuity. At the same time, discrimination in rental housing and property markets can restrict the residential choices of particular caste groups. Consequently, urban space can reproduce existing social inequalities even while creating opportunities for greater interaction. The availability and quality of education, healthcare, sanitation, transportation, and other public resources may also vary across neighbourhoods, reinforcing broader patterns of socio-economic inequality.

Caste inequalities in education and employment remain significant challenges despite the expansion of educational institutions and formal employment opportunities. Access to higher education and professional occupations has increased among historically disadvantaged communities, particularly through affirmative-action policies and expanding educational opportunities. Nevertheless, differences in family income, educational resources, social networks, and institutional support continue to affect educational outcomes. In employment, caste may influence recruitment, workplace experiences, occupational mobility, and access to professional networks. Desai and Dubey (2012) demonstrate that caste continues to intersect with educational inequality, while Thorat and Newman (2010) highlight the persistence of discrimination within economic markets. These patterns indicate that formal equality does not necessarily produce equality of opportunity in practice.

Caste also continues to influence political participation and representation in contemporary India. Democratic institutions have provided historically marginalised communities with important opportunities for political mobilisation and representation. Caste-based organisations and political movements have contributed to greater political awareness and collective assertion among disadvantaged groups. Jaffrelot (2003) argues that the political mobilisation of lower and backward castes has significantly altered the distribution of political power in India. At the same time, political mobilisation around caste can strengthen group identities and sometimes intensify social divisions. Thus, caste operates in politics both as a source of empowerment and as a continuing basis of social differentiation.

Contemporary caste relations are further shaped by the intersection of caste with class, gender, and economic status. Caste disadvantage cannot always be understood independently of economic inequality. Members of the same caste may occupy very different economic positions, while individuals from different castes may share similar class locations. Gender adds another dimension because caste norms often influence women's marriage, mobility, sexuality, and family roles. For example, the maintenance of caste boundaries through endogamy is frequently closely connected with expectations concerning women's marital choices. Therefore, understanding contemporary caste inequality requires an intersectional perspective that considers how caste



interacts with class, gender, education, occupation, and economic resources rather than treating caste as an isolated category.

The emergence of social media and digital platforms has created new possibilities for both reproducing and challenging caste identities. Digital spaces enable caste communities to organise, communicate, share information, build networks, and mobilise around social and political issues. Young people can use social media to question caste discrimination, share experiences, and promote constitutional values of equality and social justice. At the same time, digital platforms can reproduce caste stereotypes, exclusion, harassment, and discriminatory practices. Caste-based matrimonial platforms and online community groups demonstrate how technology can also strengthen traditional forms of endogamy and community networking. Thus, digitalisation does not have a single effect on caste; it can simultaneously challenge established hierarchies and create new spaces for their reproduction.

1.5 Conclusion and Suggestions

The study indicates that caste relations in contemporary urban India are undergoing significant transformation, although caste has not disappeared as a social institution. Urbanisation, education, occupational mobility, migration, and economic diversification have weakened several traditional features of the caste system, particularly the close relationship between caste and hereditary occupation. Increased interaction among diverse caste groups in workplaces, educational institutions, markets, and residential spaces has also created greater opportunities for social contact and cooperation. However, the influence of caste continues to be visible in marriage preferences, social networks, political mobilisation, and access to certain social and economic opportunities. Thus, the major finding is that caste in urban India is not simply declining but is changing its form, functions, and modes of expression (Jodhka, 2012).

At the same time, there is considerable continuity of traditional caste practices within urban society. Caste-based marriage preferences remain an important mechanism through which caste boundaries are reproduced. Families may continue to prefer matrimonial alliances within their own caste despite greater educational and occupational interaction with people from different communities. Caste networks also remain relevant in providing social support, employment information, business contacts, accommodation, and community assistance. In some urban contexts, residential clustering and social networks can further maintain caste-based boundaries. These patterns demonstrate that urbanisation does not automatically eliminate traditional social identities; instead, certain practices adapt to the conditions of modern urban life.

Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of transformation and weakening of caste boundaries. Individuals increasingly enter occupations that are unrelated to their caste background, and educational achievement and professional status have become important sources of social mobility. Urban workplaces and educational institutions provide opportunities for regular interaction among different caste groups, potentially reducing traditional forms of social distance. Inter-caste friendships, professional relationships, and, in some cases, marriages indicate



changing attitudes among sections of the urban population. The expansion of constitutional awareness, democratic values, education, and individual choice has further challenged the idea that social status should be determined exclusively by birth. These changes suggest that caste boundaries are becoming more flexible in several areas of contemporary social life.

An important development has been the emergence of new forms of caste identity and organisation. Rather than disappearing under modernisation, caste has adapted to new social, political, and technological environments. Urban caste associations increasingly function as welfare organisations, professional networks, cultural bodies, and platforms for political mobilisation. Digital media has further enabled communities to maintain connections beyond geographical boundaries, organise events, exchange information, and articulate collective demands. At the same time, digital spaces can also reproduce caste-based stereotypes and exclusion. Caste identity can therefore operate simultaneously as a source of social support, collective assertion, political representation, and social differentiation.

The findings further suggest that contemporary caste relations cannot be understood independently of class, education, gender, occupation, and economic status. Economic advancement may reduce dependence on traditional caste-based occupations but does not necessarily eliminate caste identity or discrimination. Similarly, higher education may encourage more egalitarian attitudes, yet caste preferences may continue in marriage and community relationships. The urban middle classes, therefore, represent an important site where caste and modernity interact. Individuals may adopt modern lifestyles and professional identities while retaining strong caste affiliations in family and community matters (Béteille, 1996).

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