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Sociology of Caste and the Crooked Mirror: Recovering B R Ambedkar's Legacy

KALPANA KANNABIRAN

Marking a century of debate, scholarship and politics, three texts by B R Ambedkar, M N Srinivas and Kancha Ilaiah, when read in intersection, present rich possibilities both for an understanding of caste and more importantly for a re-examination of the sociology/legal ethnography of caste and its genealogy. Ambedkar offered a multilayered, counter-hegemonic reading of caste that was lost on at least three generations of sociologists and possibly accounts for several of the conservative trends we have seen in the social sciences in institutions of higher learning. What is particularly interesting is the silence in the field of sociological work for at least five decades after Ambedkar's contribution to the sociology of caste.

*No! It was not like that at all.
It was different as all truths are
from the tales that get told.
Who tells the tale and who it is told to
Oft shape the truth.¹*

This essay focuses on three texts that read together and in relation to each other speak to the sociology of caste in ways very different from hitherto canonical readings. The three texts are B R Ambedkar's *Castes in India* (1917), M N Srinivas' *Sanskritisation* (1952) and Kancha Ilaiah's *Dalitisation and Hinduisation* (1996).² While Ambedkar's text stands on its own – foundational, solid and seminal, the essays by Srinivas and Ilaiah speak to Ambedkar's text in ways that are broadly representative of the sociology of caste and dalit studies, respectively.

Marking a century of debate, scholarship and politics, these three texts when read in intersection, present rich possibilities both for an understanding of caste and more importantly for a re-examination of the sociology/legal ethnography of caste and its genealogy. The first three sections will summarise, what I see as, the key formulations in these three texts and the fourth will explore the intersectional reading.

1 Ambedkar on the Genesis of Caste

Given that India is distinctive with respect to the unity of its culture that has evolved over centuries of constant contact and mutual intercourse between people of various stocks that make up the peoples of India, says Ambedkar, caste presents a theoretical and practical problem, because it splits up the already homogeneous unit that Indian society is.³

In order to begin to understand caste, it is necessary to look at the different scholars,

who have written about this institution – Senart, Nesfield, Risley, Ibbetson and Ketkar. Senart's focus on the idea of pollution as central to caste is not productive, because the general belief in purity is tied to priestly ceremonialism, in societies generally and the caste system is no different. Nesfield's emphasis on the "absence of messing" between members of different castes as the key to the understanding of caste is in Ambedkar's view a mistaking of effect for cause, because social intercourse (of which messing is part) is limited in a system that consists of self-enclosed units. What might later have developed into a religious injunction or acquired a prohibitory character was originally only "a natural result of caste, i.e., *exclusiveness*" (Ambedkar 2002a: 244, emphasis added). Risley and Ibbetson, says Ambedkar, "[make] no new point deserving of special attention" (ibid: 244, 256). The trouble with western scholars was that they tended to identify nuclei, around which castes have formed – occupation, tribal survivals, new beliefs, cross-breeding and migration (ibid: 255). They also tended to draw on their own historical experience resulting in an overemphasis on the role of colour in the caste system.

In general, Ambedkar finds that European scholars of caste "have taken caste very lightly as though a breath had made it" (ibid: 261). Ketkar on the other hand, he suggests, has advanced the study of caste significantly, perhaps because "not only is he a native, but he has also brought a critical acumen and an open mind to bear on his study of caste" (ibid: 244, emphasis added). Ketkar speaks of the prohibition of intermarriage and membership by autogeny as the two critical characteristics of caste. While he is the only scholar who defined caste in its relation to a system of castes, and focused on the fundamental characteristics, leaving out of account secondary or derivative ones, there is a slight confusion in his formulation, because, says Ambedkar, "[i]f you prohibit intermarriage the result is that you limit membership to those born within the group" (ibid: 245).

What are the key elements of Ambedkar's sociology of caste? There is a deep cultural unity, which is parcelled into bits

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that are castes; to begin with, there was one caste; the others are formed through imitation and excommunication (ibid: 261-62). Caste does not have a divine or religious origin. Existing practice was merely codified by Hindu law-givers. Because caste does not have scriptural origins therefore, it need not to be justified or rationalised on the grounds that it was ordained by the Shastras (ibid: 255).

To elaborate this further, Indian society is characterised by an elaborate custom of exogamy, which prohibits marriage between *sapindas* (blood kin) as well as *sagotras* (of the same class). The rules of exogamy are so rigid that any infringement or violation invites rigorous penalties. Over this exogamous society is overlaid the principle of endogamy. There is a difference between racial or tribal endogamy where the universe is large and coterminous with cultural homogeneity, and caste endogamy where a homogeneous population is split into mutually exclusive units within which both the principles of exogamy and endogamy operate in all their rigidity. This "*superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste*" (ibid: 246, emphasis in original).

But clearly it is far from easy to reconcile the principle of endogamy with the principle of exogamy. For this to be possible, there must be in place complex rules of marriage that take account of the difficulties in maintaining an even sex ratio among persons of marriageable age from marriageable groups within a caste: "*the problem of caste, then ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes within it*" (ibid: 247, emphasis in original). Imbalances in the sex ratio arising from the death of a spouse within a caste – "*surplus women*" and "*surplus men*" – then are dealt with in one of three ways:⁴ a surplus woman may be burnt on her husband's funeral pyre. This is not a very easy proposition and not always possible. She may then be subjected to enforced widowhood. This is not easy either because she may still be attractive enough to threaten the morals of the group. The second solution then lay in enforced widowhood with the widow being stripped bare of anything that might be construed as a source of allurements (ibid: 248). A

surplus man could not be burnt on the funeral pyre of his wife "simply because he is a man" (ibid: 249) and a person who wields authority "*as a maker of injunctions...*" (ibid: 249, emphasis added). Nor could he be condemned to celibacy, because he is an asset to the group. The only way balance can be maintained with reference to a surplus man is to find him a wife from girls below marriageable age, so that the balance in the marriageable cohort is not disturbed. Sati, enforced widowhood, and girl marriage are the three mechanisms through which endogamy, and by extension caste is preserved and perpetuated (ibid: 250-52).

Debunking the theory of the religious and textual origin of caste and the central role attributed to Manu, Ambedkar asserts that caste existed long before Manu, whose role was limited to codifying existing rules and preaching them.⁵ Nor he says were the Brahmins responsible for imposing the caste system on the non-Brahmin population. Essentially a class system, the Brahmins enclosed themselves and the others followed the logic of "the infection of imitation" (ibid: 257). Following from Gabriel Tarde, Ambedkar suggests that the tendency towards enclosure among the non-Brahmin castes, followed two laws of imitation. First, that imitation flows from the higher to the lower, the source of imitation enjoying prestige in the group; second, that the extent and intensity of imitation varies in proportion to distance, understood in its sociological sense. In Tarde's words, "the imitation of the nearest, of the least distant, explains the gradual and consecutive character of the spread of an example that has been set by the higher social ranks" (cf: 258). In the context of caste society those castes situated "nearest to the Brahmins have imitated all three customs...whereas those furthest off have imitated only the belief in the caste principle" (ibid: 259).

Finally because exclusion presupposes groups to be excluded, castes exist only in the plural number. And because enclosure and endogamy face the perennial threat of violation or innovation, both of which must be punished, the definitions of offences and prescription of penalties – especially excommunication – ensure the formation of new castes (ibid: 260-61).

2 Srinivas on Sanskritisation

The main features of caste as embodied in varna, Srinivas recounts, are a single all-India hierarchy, which is clear and immutable and consists of four varnas, with the fifth "literally 'beyond the pale' of caste" (Srinivas 1977: 3). Relations between castes are expressed in terms of purity and pollution; Hindu theological ideas like *samsara*, *karma* and *dharma* are woven into the fabric of caste, although the extent of their spread is not known. There are hundreds of jatis which are endogamous groups that can be roughly clustered around the four varnas. Although "Harijans or Untouchables" fall outside the varna system, at the level of the region, they are integrated through the performance of economic tasks (ibid: 3-4). While Brahmins occupy a position of dominance in scriptural descriptions and the work of Brahmin scholars, Srinivas suggests that there are several sources of dominance that operate locally, vesting power, authority and prestige in non-Brahmin castes as well. There are known instances of kings having the power to raise the status of castes in their kingdom and having the sole authority to ratify expulsion of persons from castes (ibid: 39).

In this context,

[s]anskritisation is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste.

...

Sanskritisation is generally accompanied by, and often results in, upward mobility for the caste in question; but mobility may also occur without Sanskritisation and vice versa. However, [it] results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change (ibid: 6).

The sources of Sanskritisation could be varna based or based on landownership and local dominance or based on political power. The methods adopted could centre on dress, speech and diet; occupation; intermarriage, especially hypergamy. One of its functions was to bridge the gap between secular and religious rank (ibid: 27).

Of the two distinct tendencies inherent in the caste system, "*imitation of the ways of the higher castes is one*". It is not necessarily the highest caste that is imitated, but the one that is in closest proximity.⁶

However, Sanskritisation is not an easy, smooth process. "The elders of the dominant caste in a village were the watchdogs of a pluralistic culture and value system. Traditionally, they prevented the members of a caste from taking over the hereditary occupation of another caste, whose interests would have been hurt by an inroad made into their monopoly..." (ibid: 14).

But the watchdogs served another important purpose as well, which is left implicit and unexplored in Srinivas' account:

The story is told of a man who tried to wear his dhoti and his moustache in the style of the upper caste and he was forcibly shaved and under pain of beating ordered never to attempt this again;

Members of a lower caste who wore the sacred thread were beaten by the Kshatriyas and made to pay a collective fine;

Violence was used against "exterior Harijan castes" for violating eight prohibitions, which included not wearing ornaments, not covering the upper body, not using sandals, umbrellas or flowers in the hair (ibid: 15-16).

Finally, to return to Srinivas' opening statement: "Sanskritisation seems to have occurred throughout Indian history and continues to occur...[It] is not confined to any particular section of the Indian population and its importance, both in the number of people it affects and the ways in which it affects them, is steadily increasing" (ibid: 1).

3 Kancha Ilaiah on Dalitisation

"Dalitisation requires that the whole of Indian society learns from the *Dalitwaadas*...It requires that we look at the *Dalitwaadas* in order to acquire a new consciousness. It requires that we attend to life in these *waadas*; that we appreciate what is positive, what is humane and what can be extended from *Dalitwaadas* to the whole society" (Ilaiah 1996: 116-17).

Dalitbahujan society is built around the collective of "untouchable" houses where collective living and human needs are core concerns. While there may be contradictions, these are not antagonistic. Human relations are built around labour that operates under extremely exploitative conditions. Despite a hostile, oppressive environment, hope and sharing characterise the common experience. Relations between men and women tend towards

egalitarianism, as also relations between fathers and sons. With private property being outside their realm of experience, even distribution rather than exclusive possession and accumulation of property is the norm. Ideas of creativity and knowledge systems are closely tied to productive processes and artisanry, drawing also from agriculture and animal husbandry. The disjuncture between mental and physical labour that typifies brahminical society, is absent in dalitbahujan societies, the two constantly reinforcing and enriching each other. Social intercourse tends towards greater equality and democracy, with widow remarriage, easy man-woman relations, and divorce being quite common; equality is also connoted through speech and forms of address.

Finally, "the best way to push Dalitisation into 'upper' caste houses is to address the women. [Women] see a parallel in the nature of oppression" (ibid: 130). Another major area will be to push the upper castes to engage in productive labour, the only way that they can be re-humanised.

4 Intersecting Concerns

These three essays are indispensable to an introduction to the sociology of caste and to the sociology of law in India. Each of these accounts addresses either directly or tangentially conceptions of justice, and the place of religion, gender and violence in the formation of castes, all of which are tied to each other. In a sense the primary difference between these three essays is in the manner in which they read the two dimensions of human life in caste society, i.e., partaking in "being" and "ought-to-be" (Supiot 2007: xx), and the relative emphasis they place on the two. The decision by the sociologist/ethnographer in post-colonial India about whether to use the fact of being as the point of departure, or look at being from the lens of the "ought-to-be", I would argue, is an ideological one that is determined by location.

The themes in Ambedkar's early essay anticipate contemporary debates on the anthropology of law and human rights: asserting that caste is a product of social relations, and does not have divine origins to looking at the comparative contexts of "ideas of pollution"; situating the analysis of caste endogamy-exogamy within larger

anthropological discourses on marriage practices; integrating the concerns of social reform into the anthropological project; addressing the relationship between social practice and the rise of philosophies around those practices ("At all times, it is the movement that is the most important; and the philosophies grow around it long afterwards to justify it and give it a moral support" (in Ambedkar 2002a: 252)); examining the place of the individual as distinct from classes in Indian society; and interrogating the bases of western scholarship on caste.

To dwell on some of these concerns as they are reflected in the three essays in some detail, Ambedkar raises the question of articulation interrupted by location with reference to the European/western versus the "native" in the context of colonialism. Four decades later, this translates into the Brahmin/dominant caste versus the "lower castes" in Srinivas' work in a newly independent nation. It can scarcely be forgotten that at the time Srinivas was writing, the cornerstone of the democratic norm embodied in the Constitution was that Indian society must reorder itself on the basis of a vision of justice that is shared by all its members. And yet, there is a disjuncture between the normative order and conceptions of justice in his narrative, which he is conscious of but is unable to comprehend, much less account for theoretically:

The claims which the Brahmins made for themselves and their view of the caste hierarchy are *understandable*, but not so the fact that many scholars, Indian as well as foreign, have regarded them as representations of the historical reality. *One wonders* how many dominant peasant castes in rural India had even heard of the rules governing the different *varnas* or, having heard of them, paid heed to them. *One is also at a loss to understand* how people living in villages were made to obey the rules or punished for violating them. Even today, with all the facilities and resources at the disposal of the Government of India, *it has been found very difficult* to ensure that the rights which the Indian Constitution confers on the Harijans are actually translated into practice in India's 5,60,000 villages (Srinivas 1977: 5, emphasis added).

Eight decades after Ambedkar, with social and political upheavals having demonstrated the power of dalit assertion and resistance in different parts of the

country, through literature, art and struggle, Ilaiah attempts to encapsulate that change in his formulation of the notion of dalitisation. Challenging Srinivas' fundamental assumption that brahminical and dominant world views provide models for upward mobility for dalits, he proposes a centring of dalit society as a model worthy of emulation in that it challenges the dominant tendency towards hegemony and oppression.

What is striking about these three essays is that all three of them offer explanations that mirror each other either in method or in substance. But it is a crooked mirror, which shows a reflection that is incomplete, distorted or inverted, as we shall soon see.

The fulcrum of Ambedkar's argument is that castes are born and thrive through the use of gendered violence, patriarchal relations within castes and exclusionary processes between castes. Membership within the caste is controlled and regulated through the use of sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage. In a radical departure from the reform position, Ambedkar's articulation of these issues ties the question of the annihilation of caste to the rejection of women's subjugation within caste. There is a further complexity in his argument. The anti-social spirit, in Ambedkar's view, which pushes a group to protect its own

interests by shutting out other castes, "is as much a feature of the different castes in their isolation from one another as it is of nations" (Ambedkar 2002b: 269). Read with his assertion that man enjoys impunity in caste society because "as a maker of injunctions [he] is most often above them all" (Ambedkar 2002a: 269, emphasis added), Ambedkar already provides a gendered reading of sovereignty, echoed eight decades later in Agamben's observation on the impunity enjoyed by the sovereign, who, "having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law" (Agamben 1998: 15). This radical formulation of the far-reaching theoretical and practical implications of the caste-gender complex was completely lost to sociology till very recently and certainly not reflected either in the work of Srinivas and his followers. Even Ilaiah, while he attempts to grapple with the complexity and takes some initial steps in that direction does not succeed in translating Ambedkar's critique into a thoroughgoing theory of dalitisation.

Speaking about imitation as a key process in caste formation, Ambedkar's and Srinivas' formulations are strikingly similar (notwithstanding the fact that Ambedkar is speaking essentially of caste formation and Srinivas of caste mobility).⁷ But this

similarity does not penetrate the surface. While echoing Ambedkar's argument in an almost startling fashion, Srinivas' description of Sanskritisation in the language of imitation and positive aspiration, speaks of the possibility of different models – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudram (Srinivas 1977: 7) – the panchama eloquent in her absence. This narrative masks a process predicated on the systemic and systematic use of violence and exclusion against dalits especially.

According to the varna model, the Harijans or Untouchables are outside the caste system and contact with Harijans pollutes members of the other four varnas. *But if economic, social and even ritual relations between the castes of a region are taken into account, Harijans are an integral part of the system. They perform certain essential economic tasks in agriculture, they are often village servants, messengers and sweepers, and they beat the drum at village festivals and remove the leaves on which people have dined at community dinners (Srinivas 1977: 3-4, emphasis added).*

The bald observation that "in the varna scheme Harijans pollute" negates any possibility for theorising caste violence – especially *untouchability as the bulwark of violence*. It is at this point too, that post-colonial scholarship on caste that focuses on the ethnography of pollution stands in stark contradiction to the concerns of the

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justice and law, especially as embodied in Article 17 of the Constitution, which provides the political framework for analyses of untouchability.⁸

Further, the empirical fact that exclusion based on the appropriation and debasement of labour, and the forced performance of degrading forms of labour is a critical component of violent subjugation of the “untouchable” castes is twisted in Srinivas’ account to suggest inclusion rather than its opposite. This is in fact a regression from Ambedkar’s analysis of the place of labour in the caste system:

...caste system is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers...* it is an hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other... This division of labour is not spontaneous, it is not based on natural aptitudes... [T]his stratification of occupations which is the result of the caste system is positively pernicious... [It] is not based on choice... It is based on the dogma of predestination. Considerations of social efficiency would compel us to recognise that the greatest evil in the industrial system is not so much poverty and the suffering that it involves as the fact that so many persons have callings which make no appeal to those who are engaged in them... There is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations which arises solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon those who follow them owing to the slight and stigma cast upon them by Hindu religion (Ambedkar 2002b: 263-64, emphasis in original).

In this context where people in general are denied volition, the stratification of occupations places dalitbahujans in a particularly vulnerable position – a vulnerability that is rooted in the caste system. Ilaiah looks at dalitbahujan conceptions of labour as asset and medium of creativity in the context of the absence of private property:

Dalitbahujans are the most hard-working people in village society. For them it is their labour power that is property. If the Dalitwaadas had disengaged themselves from the labour process, the village economies would have collapsed long ago... They take life as a struggle... (Ilaiah 1996: 118-19).

While force and exclusion underwrite Ambedkar’s account of imitation as intrinsic to caste formation (which refers to the entire caste system), force is deployed to resist imitation in Srinivas’ account, and force is advocated to push dominant castes

into adopting the ways of the dalits in Ilaiah’s account. With Srinivas especially, violence and force figure in pseudo-nominal terms (where details of treatment are merely mentioned as matter of academic as distinct from humane interest), rather than in the structural, constitutive terms that Ambedkar foregrounds. While Ilaiah does take note of the structural impact of violence, and attempts to map the route to a “de-casteised” society, his analysis masks completely the ways in which patriarchal control structures social relations within caste, even in dalitbahujan society.

Yet, the strength of Ilaiah’s essay lies in its attempt to resurrect Ambedkar’s utopia through an inversion of Srinivas’ argument. The assumption that the lower castes imitate the upper castes despite being constantly beaten down by the latter, by itself does not describe the whole truth. The violence of the upper castes and the processes of exclusion coexist with a utopia, a whole different world that dalits have built in stark contrast, both on the ground through struggles and in the visions of dalitbahujan intellectuals as Gail Omvedt demonstrates.⁹ And perhaps a consideration of this different world is where a theory of imitation should take us – a praxiologically more productive endeavour than being trapped, as we have been for generations, in the painful ethnography of caste dominance.

5 Postscript

An intersectional reading of these three essays underscores the fact that standpoint is critical in the understanding and theorising of caste, and looking at or describing imitation per se is of little heuristic value. What are the material contexts of imitation? What are the methods? What are the consequences? Most important of all, what is the objective, location and standpoint of the sociologist who is describing processes of imitation?

Very early on, Ambedkar offered us a multilayered, counter-hegemonic reading of caste that was lost on at least three generations of sociologists and possibly accounts for several of the conservative trends we have seen in the social sciences in institutions of higher learning. What is particularly interesting is the silence in the sociological work that emerged at that

time and for at least five subsequent decades about Ambedkar’s contribution to the sociology of caste. What were the considerations that entered into the building of the corpus of Indian sociology in the latter half of the 20th century that erased Ambedkar so completely?

NOTES

- 1 Vasanth Kannabiran, “Menakaa”, unpublished, May 2008.
- 2 This essay does not review the entire writings of these three authors; neither does it review here the corpus on caste. It has the limited objective of looking at these three essays in comparison, since they use a similar concept in the theorising of caste. My argument here has developed in the classroom in NALSAR, and I am grateful to eight batches of my students for allowing me the space to think through a different position.
- 3 This homogeneity, it must be clarified, is not an ethnic homogeneity, but cultural one. B R Ambedkar (2002a). All citations from Ambedkar are from this source unless otherwise specified.
- 4 Not dealing with them will mean opening the caste to the menace of immoral conduct. Emphasis in original.
- 5 Elsewhere Ambedkar asserts that the only route out of caste, to the realisation of his utopia lies in the simultaneous annihilation of caste and destruction of Hindu religion, both of which are mutually reinforcing. See Ambedkar (2002b).
- 6 The similarity of this statement to Ambedkar’s is striking. It is not necessarily the highest caste that is imitated but one that is in closest proximity. *Social Change in Modern India*, p 13. Emphasis added.
- 7 While Srinivas labours over the varna-jati debate, Ambedkar in another essay dismisses the Chaturvarnya thesis. See Ambedkar (2002b).
- 8 Srinivas’ statement on the problems of interdisciplinarity and his assertion that his is “only a social anthropologist’s view of social change in modern India”, does not really address the question of the social location of the anthropologist, which is critical to the theorising of caste. See his “Author’s Preface to 1977 Reissue”, pp vii-viii, Srinivas (1977).
- 9 “Utopias are projected visions, sometimes imagined in the past, sometimes located in a different world, sometimes inscribed in the future possibility. But they all lay a claim to some kind of reality, the reality of being possible, and in so doing provide the motivation for efforts at social transformation” Gail Omvedt (2008: 15).

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