The Implications of the Declining Power of Caste Hierarchies in Rural India:

Issues for the Shimla Conference

by James Manor

Since the mid-1990s, it has become clear from research by anthropologists that the power of caste hierarchies in rural India has waned substantially. Caste increasingly tends to denote 'difference' more than 'hierarchy'. This change has occurred unevenly across India, but enough evidence has emerged from different regions to indicate that it is a national trend. It is arguably one of the two most important changes to occur in India since Independence, along with the consolidation of a socially rooted democracy.

Despite this, however, we know too little about the implications of this change. We need to consider its implications both within local arenas in rural areas, and at higher levels. Does it open the way to the emergence of new forms of dominance at the grassroots, to more accommodative or more brutish power relations within rural society? Why has it brought in its wake rising levels of violence in some places but not in others? As this change undermines the power within local arenas of once-dominant castes, has it also made it impossible for people there to get things done on their own through collective action – so that they turn increasingly to higher levels of government for assistance?

Since rural dwellers still decide election outcomes, how has the decline in caste hierarchies impinged upon the democratic process, at higher levels? What opportunities and dangers attend it? Is it liberating, or does it produce social dislocation which inspires alienation and destructive tension? Does it facilitate or impede social movements from below, and (from above) the construction of social coalitions by political parties at national and especially state levels? How has it affected programmes and efforts to promote development and social justice? Might it hold promise for parties of the left or of the Hindu nationalist right – or for centrist parties?

The rest of this note is a tentative, somewhat crude attempt to summarise what we now know -- or suspect – and to raise questions for discussion at the Shimla conference. The comments that follow should be treated as hypotheses more than as established fact. Everything here is open for debate, which is very welcome.

1. The once formidable hierarchical structures associated with caste have substantially broken down in much of rural India. Most people within the majority of the rural population who were dominat<u>ed</u> under the old order no longer accept the claims to superiority (or comply with the wishes) of groups which long enjoyed high caste status. As a result, in much of rural India the classic pattern in which a 'dominant caste' exercised inordinate social and political influence over village life has collapsed.

2. This does not imply, however, that caste as a social institution has wasted away. People still tend overwhelmingly to marry their children to other members of their endogamous caste group (that is, their *jati*). They also still tend – quite often, but to a lesser degree -- to undertake collective action in concert with other members of their *jati*. (So caste possesses <u>materiality</u>, and is not just a trick of the mind.) But when castes interact, they do so on a more equal footing than before. Endogamy remains formidable despite the decline of hierarchy, and it powerfully shapes social interactions.

3. The decline of hierarchy and thus of caste-based dominance does not always imply, however, that dominance has disappeared. In many areas, there are still dominant groups, but they tend to come from diverse caste backgrounds, and their dominance derives less from caste status than from other things. These include economic power, numerical strength, access to and the control over information, connections to powerful politicians and bureaucrats beyond the locality, patron-client networks, and the threat and/or the use of coercion and violence. In much of India, dominance has not vanished with caste hierarchy, but has been reconstituted by other means.

4. However, in some other rural arenas, no group can wield sufficient power to dominate. But formerly dominant groups still seek to operate in ways associated with the old patterns. They often bitterly resent refusals by other groups to defer to them and to comply with their wishes. The ensuing tensions have sometimes triggered rising levels of violence – even in some of the traditionally more peaceable areas of India.

5. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that inter-caste violence has increased most in such areas – places where greater economic development has occurred, where economic inequalities have long been less extreme, and where (partly as a result) the old caste hierarchies were less oppressive. This appeared to be true of southern Karnataka.[1] Field investigations in rural areas near Mysore City in February 2011 indicated that there, the problem of inter-caste violence and tension had been overstated in press reports. On the other hand, reliable informants argued convincingly that tension (though not much violence) had increased in nearby Mandya District. In Mandya, Vokkaligas (the traditionally dominant caste there) make up roughly half of the population, giving them greater numerical strength than is enjoyed by any caste group in <u>any</u> other district of the state. That, and the habits of mind which developed as a result, have caused Vokkaligas in Mandya to seek to interact with other groups in the same, unyielding ways that have long prevailed – which has generated greater tensions.

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[1] Note the occurrence of serious inter-caste violence in southern Karnataka. The old and less oppressive caste hierarchies there are analysed in J. Manor: "Karnataka: Caste, Class Dominance and Politics in a Cohesive Society", in F. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds.) *Dominance and State Power in India; Decline of a Social Order,* volume one (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989).

6. Mandya, however, appears to be unusual. When tensions and conflicts have indeed increased in most areas where the old socio-economic order was less oppressive (such as southern Karnataka where the incidence of landlessness was extremely low), two things appear to have happened. First, as caste-based dominance has become impossible to sustain and the formerly dominant local elites have been unable to establish new forms of dominance by other means, they chafe bitterly against this. Second, since the old caste hierarchies in these areas were less oppressive, traditionally lower-status groups are more willing and able to mount challenges to those elites than are their counterparts in more inequitable regions.

7. One important influence on inter-caste relations within any given area comes from the availability – or non-availability – of 'exits', or opportunities for spatial mobility. Surinder Jodhka's studies of Punjab indicate that tensions and conflict tend to be more marked in areas where prosperous and/or disadvantaged groups lack 'exits' -- opportunities to move to other areas to escape social conditions which they dislike -- than in areas where such mobility is possible. This theme has importance in Nanjangud District, near Mysore City, where *Dalits* and other disadvantaged groups were making good use of 'exits' – by commuting by train to the City to work as day labourers, while still residing in their villages. The theme also has great importance in Telangana and coastal Andhra (two of the three sub-regions of Andhra Pradesh) where once dominant landed castes are reliably said to be 'obsessed' with exiting to the US and Australia. A huge number of families from those castes have placed relatives overseas – partly because the standard of living there is higher, and partly because they are frustrated by 'Naxalite' activity and the decline in deference from low status groups.[2] 'Exits' appear to be used less often in Rayalaseema (the third sub-region), where inter-caste tensions appear to be more acute, partly as a result.

8. There is also evidence, however, that in many localities -- in under-developed and more developed regions, and in more and less inequitable regions -- inter-caste violence has <u>not</u> increased. New, more accommodative power relations – or at least grudging, uneasy local and regional political 'settlements' have emerged in which no group dominates. This appears to happen in part because competition between different members of elites has compelled them to reach out to less prosperous groups for support (and for votes in local and higher-level elections). The composition of local and regional elites has become more heterogeneous in caste terms. The end of dominance has often been reluctantly accepted by formerly dominant groups in such areas partly because those settlements still leave them with disproportionate influence.

9. The decline in the power of caste hierarchy has made it difficult and often impossible for villages, as collectivities, to get certain important things done on their own. When caste hierarchies were more widely accepted, leading figures in

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[2] I am grateful to Anil Kumar at ISEC for these insights.

the locally dominant caste enjoyed enough influence and deference to persuade or force most villagers to join in collective actions (sometimes attended by religious ceremonies) to bring in the harvest, repair local facilities, implement local projects. etc. The waning of hierarchy has often made this impossible, so villagers must find new ways to "get things done".[3]

10. Two new options have emerged over the last two decades as a result of changes in the political system. First, the election and empowerment of elected *gram panchayats* at or near the village level was mandated by the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1993. Some state governments in India's federal system have been generous in devolving powers and funds to *panchayats*, but most have not. Where they are strong, *panchayats* often make it possible for villages to "get things done" through democratic processes in which elites are often very influential but not necessarily dominant -- since they must share power with elected councillors from other groups and attract votes from those groups.[4] But the limited funds and powers which such councils possess in much of India severely limits the utility of this option.[5]

11. A second more widely available option has been provided by a remarkable proliferation over the last 20 years (and especially over the last seven) of government programmes to promote development and to tackle poverty. Accessing resources and technical assistance from these programmes, in order to "get things done", requires villagers to reach upward to politicians and bureaucrats at sub-district and district levels. This has knit villages more tightly into the political system, and arguably enabled democratic politics to penetrate more effectively downward into local arenas. The need to reach upward has triggered another sort of proliferation – of village level political entrepreneurs or 'fixers' who travel to sub-district and district headquarters to appeal to politicians and bureaucrats for help.[6] When they prove to be effective at this, these 'fixers' often become leaders within their villages. Since a significant proportion of them come from castes other than those which were formerly dominant, this further erodes the influence of old village elites. That inspires resentment among the erstwhile elites, but it also tends to make local politics more open and democratic, and it helps to ensure that anti-poverty programmes actually reach the poor.

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[3] This phrase looms large in a particularly vivid demonstration of these changes: G.K. Karanth *et al.,* chapters 11-14 on Baumgartner and R. Hogger (eds.) *In Search of Sustainable Livelihood Systems: Managing Resources and Change* (Sage Publications, London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, 2004).
[4] See for example, chapter two of R. Crook and J. Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998).
[5] J. Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (World Bank, Washington, 1999); and J. Manor, "Democratic Decentralisation in Two Indian States: Past and Present" *Indian Jounral of Political Science* (March 2002) pp. 51-72.
[6] See A. Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Democracy and Development* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2002); and J. Manor, "'Towel over Armpit': Small-time Political Fixers in India's States" in A. Varshney (ed.) *India and the Politics of Developing Countries: Essays in Honour of Myron Weiner* (Sage Publications, London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, 2004) pp. 60-86.

12. Evidence from north-central and south India points to one important trend which has been examined in a comparative study of Uganda, Brazil and Madhya Pradesh.[7] It found that democratic processes at the local level can persuade contending interests – including competing elites drawn both from formerly dominant and from formerly dominated groups – that 'politics' need not be a zero-sum game, and that political accommodations in which no winner takes all and no one achieves dominance are worth accepting. When this anodyne-sounding idea takes root, it sometimes reduces the risk of inter-caste violence

13. The increased violence which in some areas has resulted from waning caste dominance appears, for the most part, not to have contributed much to the violent resistance to government authority in the 'Naxalite' belt. On present evidence, the most of the areas in which such resistance arises are those occupied by *adivasis*, most of whom stand at one remove from the caste system and reside in entirely (or almost entirely) *adivasi* villages where no 'dominant caste' ever held sway.

14. How does the decline of hierarchy affect higher level politics: voting behaviour by different castes; the efforts of political parties to cultivate support from castes, to forge alliances or sow divisions between castes; and the influence of leaders from various castes at higher levels? Has the change made it easier or more difficult to arrange political accommodations between castes at higher levels? Has Indian democracy become more genuine but also less stable and manageable as a result of the change? As hierarchies wane, do appeals to caste identities become more or less effective? Does the change create opportunities for those who seek to mobilize people along class, religious or sub-regional lines?

15. Have waning hierarchies affected the strong tendency of Indians to shift their preoccupations from one of the many identities available to them to others – often and with great fluidity? (This tendency has usually prevented tension from developing along a single fault line in society.)

16. Some studies suggest that the decline in the power of caste hierarchies has made India an even more genuine democracy by providing severely disadvantaged castes with greater opportunities and capacities -- and greater leverage in the political system. Others call this into question, or stress that the main beneficiaries are found in the middle strata of the old hierarchies.

17. Caste hierarchies have changed, but has 'class' – or perhaps to put it more helpfully, have 'socio-economic relations/conditions' -- changed? Clearly the latter have changed, but we need to consider how and how much, in different regions – and how this connects to the declining power of caste hierarchies. Those hierarchies' loss of power may have 'caused' certain changes in socio-

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[7] M. Melo, N. Ng'ethe and J. Manor, *Against the Odds: Politicians, Institutions and the Struggle against Poverty* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, London/NewYork, forthcoming).

economic relations, and even if that is not true, they will have coloured those relations. Socio-economic changes have also demonstrably played some role in causing the power of caste hierarchies to decline. (In my last discussions with M.N. Srinivas, he took this view – he had a decidedly materialist explanation, seeing the disintegration of the old *jajmani* system as more crucial than, say, democratic politics or even the spread of education.) But does the decline in caste hierarchies make 'class' more important – within villages, or across regions? Does it create opportunities for political parties that stress class issues? (It does not yet appear to do so, as far as I can see. I don't see how it helps Hindu nationalists either.) Or does it make 'class' a much more complex, ambiguous topic – and a more confusing (and thus less compelling) reality in rural areas? We need to remember that economic inequality has grown along with gross domestic product since the mid-1990s. But are the inequalities mainly between urban and rural areas, or do they loom large within the rural sector?

18. Some studies – not least, by D.L. Sheth -- have argued that a new middle class has emerged in India that includes many rural dwellers and many people from the lower strata in the old hierarchies. This is partly the result of reservations, but perhaps also as a consequence of the decline in the influence of the old hierarchies. Other commentators argue that the main impact of this trend is to alienate members of the middle class who come from the lower strata from their caste fellows who remain outside the middle class.

19. The ideas in Gopal Guru's recent study of Maharashtra will surely give us other things to consider. It will be interesting to see if, like *Dalits* (and non-*Dalits*) interviewed by Devesh Kapur and colleagues in UP (in the *EPW*, 28 August 2010, pp. 39-49), he has have found "massive changes" and an acceleration of the pace of change, so that "the world has been turned upside down". Kapur *et al*. also found that the acquisition of status has now become possible through changes in consumption patterns offering a "new freedom…that has been historically unattainable". They report that changes in wealth alone cannot "explain the magnitude of the changes in social practice". They also argue that "an increase in access to status, even from consumption goods, is an expansion in freedoms".

These and other issues have not been adequately discussed. We will have a very formidable group of analysts at the Shimla conference -- and fortunately, they will express diverse views. This should enable us to refine and elaborate our ideas.