

and also providing a critique of the state. This is a welcome departure from the current obsession with objectivity. But, the normative values are not embedded into a particular ideological stand point, which could be both strength and also a weakness. The weakness is evident from the fact that the author has chosen not to look at nationality resistance from its multi-layered class dimensions and focused mostly on unfolding events and critiquing them.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that the book has opened up new avenues for serious political debates in Assam on the nationality question in general and ULFA issue in particular. By doing that Mahanta has reiterated his commitment to social science research.

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**Hira Singh, *Recasting Caste: From Sacred to the Profane*, Delhi, SAGE Publications, 2014, pp. XIX + 288, ₹795.**

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The book under review revives interests in ‘caste in class’ and ‘class in caste’ debate using historical evidences and ethnographic materials. It argues that the mainstream sociology of caste and class in India has mistakenly put caste in religious and cultural moulds immutable by economic and political forces that, however, have played an important role in the determination of caste hierarchy, the essence of the caste system. In other words, the notion of the permanence of caste structure and equating caste with Hinduism belie historical and ethnographic evidences. Moreover, while mainstream sociology takes a sacred view of caste, the author emphasises on profane view of caste, which is diametrically opposed to the position of the mainstream sociologists.

The book is an engaging critique of Weber and Dumont whose influences on the mainstream sociology of caste and class in India overshadowed those of Marx and others who were able to differentiate the economic and political from the religious and cultural forces, and gave primacy to the profane over sacred in their interpretations of the structure of Indian society, but the latter too erred in ignoring the intersection of ‘structure’ and ‘superstructure’ that actually forms the bedrock of the caste system in India.

The book is an invitation to the mainstream sociologists to revisit their positions, which, according to Singh, have serious theoretical and methodological limitations, which are as follows. First, the mainstream sociology has erred on the side of history and material facts by ignoring the role of economic and political forces and giving exclusive emphasis on ideas of caste, mainly its religious and cultural aspects. Second, the mainstream sociology has critiqued Marxists

for their ideological orientation, but it too has fallen in the trap of its own ideology that is the notion of *homo hierarchicus*. Marxists have shown little interests in the study of caste as they consider it superstructure. In a way, they too are unable to see the interconnection between the 'base' and 'superstructure', denying historical facts and pursuing a flawed methodology.

Singh emphasises on understanding the 'intersection of economic, political and ideological components of caste system', and opines that the roots of the caste system lie in 'hierarchical access to land rights and political power', supported by religious and secular ideology. His position is in contrast to that of the mainstream sociologists who interpret differential access to land rights and political power flowing from the ideology of religion and caste and not the vice versa. Consequently, while Singh is able to underline the intra-caste inequality in his study of caste, the mainstream sociologists remained stuck in the idea of homogeneity of caste and the 'myth of its immutability' that denies history the flow of its current.

The political economy approach adopted by Singh in this book makes him historically relevant and at the same time contemporary in context, while the mainstream sociologists would appear to be outdated as dynamics of caste have changed fast. While the hierarchical notion of caste still constitutes the bedrock of the caste system, the dominance of religious and cultural notions of caste system is under serious strain under changing economic and political forces. The notion of purity and impurity has been reduced to residue, and is by and large a matter of private belief. So has been the idea and practice of untouchability, although there are still its traces in practices. But what is more important is the fact that the notion of *homo hierarchicus*, the foundation pillar of mainstream sociology, is methodologically incompetent to understand the contemporary political mobilisation and articulation of caste interests under Indian democracy. A major churning is visible in the pattern of differential and intra-caste mobilisation, which is essentially an articulation of differential class interests. For example, there are different political groups of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and so are of the Scheduled Castes (SCs). The success of the Brahmin Dalit combination experimented by Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh tears the *homo hierarchicus* notion of caste system apart. Both the SCs and Brahmins were politically marginalised by the Muslim–Yadav dominated Samajwadi Party. The political interests superseded ideology of caste, and that was the main spur behind Brahmin Dalit combination. There are many other examples of intra-caste differential mobilisation for social, economic and political gains. Even among the SCs, there are strong intra-caste mobilisation like *Jatavs* versus other SCs in UP, *Madigas* versus *Malas* in Andhra Pradesh, *Chudas* versus *Chamars* in Haryana, etc. These differential mobilisations are essentially differential articulation of social, economic and political interests. The *homo hierarchicus* framework is methodologically weak to explain it.

In the first four chapters of the book Singh engages with the various approaches to the understanding of caste in India and then explains his political economy framework and its merits. He applies his framework to three case studies which

have been described in chapters 5, 6, and 7. In chapter five of the book, he digs the history of intra-caste and intra-kin inequality among the Rajputs of Marwar of Rajasthan and found that an entirely new caste of Rajputs developed from the lineage of the non-ruling brothers of the Rajput rulers. Due to the law of primogeniture, the eldest son of the king was anointed to the throne and given all the economic and political rights of the kingdom. He was also the owner of the *Khalsa*, the crown land. His younger siblings were given rights over land of a few villages, but as *Jagir* or the grantees' land. The latter enjoyed their economic rights as Jagirdars. All others who were given rights over land as grantees were also called Jagirdars. However, even within Jagirdars, there were hierarchies depending on the nature of the land rights that also determined their respective positions in the social hierarchy. More importantly, the various associations of landowners were formed, but all of them were governed by their specific class interests notwithstanding of the homogeneity of caste.

Chapter six of the book describes the tussle between sacred and profane in a village of eastern Uttar Pradesh, and explains the challenge to the local authority of the erstwhile leaders from the Rajput caste by newly empowered Yadavas as they gained access to land after the abolition of the Zamindari system and political power through universal adult franchise under democracy. He documents various incidents of lower caste attacking upper caste Rajputs on the issue of disputes often related to the control over a piece of land. The sacred stands challenged by profane. Moreover, the plurality of political leadership in the village erstwhile ruled by three families of Rajputs has become a reality. But even if Rajputs succeed in retaining the leadership of the village, 'the nature of leadership will change, simply because the different caste will now compete with one another for leadership in which wealth, education, personal attainments, and numerical strength will play a decisive role' (p. 222). The erstwhile social hierarchy with expected social roles has to face new challenges arising out of the forces of profane.

In chapter seven of the book, Singh explains the phenomenon of the disappearance of caste among the indentured Indians in Africa and other countries. He finds that although most of the indentured Indians have retained their strong affinity and identity of a Hindu, their occupation-based caste identities melted into their new class identity of indentured labourer.

Over a period of time, most of the indentured Indians dropped their caste identities and forged a class identity based on their economic position in the new land. Therefore, he argues that if caste and Hinduism are homology, why is it that the former disappeared while the latter remained strongly intact among the Indentured Indians. Weber, Dumont and others subscribing to the view of homology of Hinduism and caste stand exposed to the limitation of their approaches.

The merits of the book lie in providing an alternative framework to the study of caste and class in Indian society, the mainstream interpretation of which has been mainly religious, cultural and functional. The mainstream sociology has

declared caste immutable, caste structure static and caste-based relations functional (*jajmani* system). The undercurrents of tensions, conflicts and caste-based exploitations have been ignored. The political economy framework of this book not only challenges the static notion of caste, the myth of caste immutability, but also exposes caste-based inequality and caste–class conflicts.

Undoubtedly, the book is a valuable addition to the numerous studies of caste and class in India. However, there are many social facts which fly in the face of his alternative interpretations. First, if class in caste is the dominant social fact, as interpreted by Singh, then what explains the enduring phenomenon of caste endogamy? Is it not religious and cultural? Second, notwithstanding the dilution of the practice of pollution and purity in social interactions, the caste-based discrimination continues to define socio-economic relations. There are studies which found strong vestiges of caste in some of the most modern sectors. Third, there has been horizontal proliferation of caste-based political groups and instances of intra-caste differential political preferences. Yet, they are mostly localised phenomena.

To sum up, if mainstream sociology helps us in reading static, religious and cultural aspects of caste and caste system in India, the political economy framework adopted by Singh is useful in understanding the changing dynamics of cast–class relations, intra-caste inequality and differential mobilisation and elements of inter-caste and intra-caste tensions. Both the approaches are not competitive, but complementary. Students and scholars of Indian society should take note of both without getting carried away by either.

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**Pratiksha Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 433, ₹1150.**

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Scholarly works on legal ethnographies from India are too limited to analyse the character of judicial structures, processes and the contribution of social structures to the process of judicial decision making. Pratiksha Baxi's topical book *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India* offers a new model for a perfect blending of ethnographic experiences of different role makers in a judicial process of rape trials. This work uses inter-sectionality framework to comprehend class–caste–gender (to some extent, inclusive of queer) formulations in court room experiences. The multi-faceted and comprehensive analyses of how certain cases of sexual violence act as a caste crime or a combination of multiple

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