Commentaries

Understanding the Persistence of Caste: A Commentary on Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj and Kumar (2014)

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Abstract

We contextualise Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar's (2014) paper within a broader literature on caste and collective mobilisation. Cotterill and colleagues' paper represents a fresh and timely attempt to make sense of the persistence of caste from the perspective of Social Dominance Theory. Cotterill and colleagues, however, do not examine caste differences in the endorsement of karma, and take behavioural asymmetry among lower castes for granted. Cotterill and colleagues also adhere to a Varna model of the caste system that arguably is simplistic and benefits the upper castes of Indian society. We caution that emphasising behavioural asymmetry and endorsing the Varna model might further stigmatise lower castes, especially Dalits, and feed into a conformity bias already predominant in caste-related psychological research. We argue that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation and legitimising myths in the Indian context needs to take into account the particular meaning and functions of these constructs in specific intergroup contexts, and for identity positions salient within these contexts. We contend that any examination aimed at better understanding the nature of social hierarchy and oppression within the caste system and Indian society in general remains inconclusive without including a focus on the construction and contestation of social categories and social identities.

Keywords: legitimising ideologies, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance theory, conformity bias, caste system in India, self-categorisation, social identity

> Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.
> (Marx, 1853/1975)

Writing in 1853 when railways were being introduced to India, Karl Marx predicted that the Indian caste system would wither away with modern industrialisation. Taking their cue from Marx, many scholars of Indian society also expected that caste would lose its significance and salience with the expansion of democracy, rapid changes to

the economic order, and expansion of the education system in modern India. Even noted sociologist M.N. Srinivas wrote a premature obituary of the caste system (Srinivas, 2003). Caste has, however, evaded all predictions and expectations. Despite undergoing significant changes, caste not only remained resilient during the process of industrialisation and modernisation but also has become an indispensable part of the democratic process in India today (Bayly, 2001; Gupta, 2005; Rudolph, 1965). For example, no election in India can now be fought without managing caste arithmetic. As we write, Prime Minister Modi's party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), suffered a humiliating defeat in the assembly elections of the Bihar state. One of the main reasons for the defeat was the anti-reservation (a form of affirmative action) remarks made by RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) chief Mohan Bhagwat. To assuage the fears of lower castes who depend heavily on caste-based reservations for their education and jobs, Prime Minister Modi's party tried to control the damage by promising that an upper-caste person would not be made the chief minister of Bihar (Hebbar, 2015). Other than playing a significant part in democratic processes, there has been a steady increase in the significance and influence of caste in different spheres of life in contemporary India, such as marriage, education, jobs, and health (Desai & Dubey, 2012; Vaid, 2014).

What makes caste persist despite sixty years of democratisation in India? There have been serious attempts to make sense of the persistence of caste in the existing literature (e.g., Gorringe, 2005; Jodhka, 2015; Narula, 1999; Rao, 2009; Teltumbde, 2011; Vaid, 2014; Waghmore, 2013). Although these works provide deeper insights into processes that help sustain caste, they do not give much thought to their psychological underpinnings. Importantly, these works provide empirical evidence of rising violence against Dalits in different parts of the country and record various socio-political changes in the caste system. The main change noted is the weakening of traditional power relations between dominant and subordinate castes. The second change is the declining role of ideological beliefs in the legitimation and persistence of the caste system among lower castes. These works attribute socio-political changes to growing consciousness and assertion among lower castes. Furthermore, they emphasise the critical role played by caste-based violence rather than ideological and/or moral justification in maintaining traditional structures of power relations in Indian society. As a consequence, little is known about the psychological processes involved in the persistence of caste. In fact, the caste system is yet to be seriously studied from a social psychological perspective (see Y. Jogdand, 2010). Against this background, Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar's (2014) paper illuminates psychological processes that might help sustain caste hierarchy and discrimination, emphasising the role and relevance of ideological justifications.

While we applaud Cotterill and colleagues for bringing the attention of social and political psychologists to the problem of caste in India, we are concerned about some of the assumptions regarding caste ostensibly held by Cotterill and colleagues. Foremost among these is the "orientalist" assumption (see Said, 1978) that caste is a remarkably stable hierarchical structure surviving over 3000 years. Cotterill and colleagues, as a result, provide a partial account of the caste system that downplays the features of contestation, protest and change, and inflates the features of stability and consensus. What concerns us the most is the fact that Cotterill and colleagues examine particular constructs from the caste context (e.g. karma) while abstracting them from the specific intergroup relations in which they occur. Such a decontextualised approach, we argue, not only fails to capture complexity and dynamics in the caste context but can also have deleterious consequences for lower castes in Indian society.

Our primary aim in this commentary, therefore, is to discuss the implications of Cotterill and colleagues' approach to the social psychological study of caste. We start by providing a brief background of the caste context in India, highlighting important features of contestation, protest, and change. We, then, move on to the specific issues arising out of Cotterill and colleagues' approach to examining the legitimation of the caste system. We conclude

by emphasising a contextualised approach to the study of social hierarchy and oppression that takes into account the construction and contestation of social categories and identities.

Contestation, Protest and Social Change in Indian Society: An Overview

The persistence of caste is not only of academic but also of democratic and humanitarian concern. Caste is not simply a social stratification that underlies hierarchy, difference, endogamy and division of labour in Indian society. Caste, at the same time, also forms an ideology and practice supporting inequality and oppression. After independence in 1947, the Indian constitution recognised the disabling effects of caste on historically disadvantaged communities and made provisions of "reservations", i.e. compensatory protective discrimination, in the form of quotas for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in government service and public sector undertakings, educational institutions, legislative assemblies and local self-governments. During the 1990s the Indian government accepted the recommendations put forward by the Mandal Commission, extending benefits of reservations to Other Backward Class (OBC) (Das, 2000). OBCs are somewhat middle-range peasant and other agrarian castes who are not Untouchables but are considered backward due to their disadvantaged peasant status. Upper castes in India saw OBC reservations unwarranted and inimical to their group interests, and their implementation set off a chain of protests all over the country, including a few suicides by members of the upper castes (Chakravarti, 2003).

The reservations based on caste membership are now an important feature of contemporary socio-political reality in India. The upper castes believe that reservations are the root cause of the persistence and politicisation of caste identity; they see reservations as the major reason behind their unemployment and argue that the merit and efficiency in education and administration have declined due to the intake of reserved category candidates. Even the Supreme Court of India has given successive anti-reservation verdicts, essentially rendering reservations anti-merit and conflicting with national interests (P. Jogdand, 2007, p. 321). For lower castes, such arguments are clearly humiliating as they undermine thousands of years of victimisation and feed into the stigmatisation of beneficiaries. The reservation policy was a major social justice initiative aimed at actualising the values of liberty, equality and fraternity enshrined in the Indian constitution. In the last sixty years of implementation, reservations have provided Untouchables and Adivasis (Tribals) opportunity to access the government, public section undertakings, educational institutions and politics. Although the benefits of reservations have been limited to a small section of Untouchables and Adivasis, reservations have empowered these historically oppressed communities and contributed effectively to positive social change in Indian society (P. Jogdand, 2007). The social change outcomes of reservation policy provide a justification for its continued implementation. However, the politics over reservations has become a controversial and sensitive issue recently.

It is interesting to note that despite blatant stigmatisation of beneficiaries, many middle and upper castes are aggressively demanding reservations. This includes Jats from Haryana, Gujjars from Rajasthan, Patels from Gujrat, Marathas from Maharashtra and so on. Even Brahmins in Tamilnadu, Kerala, Gujrat and Uttar Pradesh have made similar demands (Seetharaman, 2015). So far reservations for these castes have been rejected owing to their dominant nature in the rural societies in which they are positioned. Indeed, M. N. Srinivas (1959) conceptualised these middle and upper castes as "dominant castes" due to their demographic importance and land ownership.

Some of these dominant castes are poor, but they possess land, businesses, cattle, muscle power or political clout. These castes need OBC status to benefit from job quota in government services (Jaffrelot, 2016). Due to agrarian distress and serious stagnation in the rural economy the young generation from some of the dominant castes are being forced to move to the city and seek jobs in the service sector. This younger generation finds it hard to enter and accommodate themselves in the urban service sector. They therefore either are forced into unskilled jobs or fall back on scarce and highly competitive government jobs. The government jobs provide stability and financial security, and importantly, better marriage prospects. Sadly, these demands for OBC status from dominant castes subvert the original logic of reservation policies. As mentioned earlier, reservation policies were designed as a social justice initiative with a potential to address discrimination based on caste, but the aggressive demands for OBC status from dominant castes undermines its function as a poverty reduction programme, feeding into caste-based mobilisation (Thorat, 2016).

Is reservation policy, then, responsible for the persistence and politicisation of caste identities in India? The emergent politics over reservation benefits certainly has implications for increased salience of caste identities. However, we must also remember that in attributing the persistence of caste to reservation policies we assume that caste is an anachronism that is alive due to the incomplete modernisation of the Indian economy. As Jodhka (2015) notes, the major problem with making this assumption is that even in settings where traditional social and economic structures have radically changed, caste persists with equal influence (p. xiv). For example, despite the assumption that under economic liberalisation employers will prefer the skills and efficiency of a worker rather than their caste identity (e.g., Panini, 1996), several studies have highlighted caste identity as an important factor in the urban labour market. These studies show that caste identity creates barriers for even highly skilled Dalits in professional jobs (Thorat & Newman, 2010) as well as in private entrepreneurship (Mhaskar, 2014). The urban labour market is not free from caste-based prejudice and discrimination. In a field experiment among job applicants in the urban private sector, Thorat and Attewell (2007) found that job applicants with a Dalit name were significantly less likely to be preferred for the job than equivalently qualified persons with a high-caste Hindu name. These studies, therefore, debunk the assumption that industrialisation and the resultant urbanisation has rendered the hold of caste obsolete.

Some scholars regard reservations as a legacy of colonial policies of divide and rule and blame British colonial rule for bringing caste identities to the fore amongst a plethora of social identities prevailing in the Indian subcontinent (for an overview of these arguments see Dirks, 2001, pp. 286-288). Can colonialism be blamed for the persistence of caste? It might be true that British colonial practices, such as caste-based censuses, politicised caste identities and rendered caste as "a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization" (Dirks, 2001, p. 5). However, one can locate the salience of caste identities much before colonial rule. Caste has been a contestable and "political" issue throughout Indian history.

The earliest challenge to caste came from Gautama Buddha, sixth-century B.C. religious founder of Buddhism. Buddha rejected the superiority of Brahmins and emphasised social equality by allowing women and Untouchables admittance in his Sangha (community of spiritual practitioners; Omvedt, 2011). During the early centuries of the new millennium, several philosophers from the Buddhist tradition, such as Dhammakirti, Dignaga, and Ratnakirti, challenged caste on the basis of rationalism and Apoha philosophy (N. Jogdand, 2016; Patil, 2003). The Buddhist arguments against caste have been documented in *Vajrasuchi*, a second-century Sanskrit treatise written by Acharya Asvaghosha (1835/2002). Muslim invasions also brought opposition against caste during this era. Although

Islam bore a message of equality of human beings, Muslim rulers in the medieval period of Indian history often cooperated with the Brahmins to enforce caste rule (Omvedt, 2011). However, as the egalitarian and (spiritual) emancipatory visions of Sufism began to spread among lower strata of Indian society, foundations for a new revolt against the caste system in the form of Bhakti (devotion) movements also emerged.

From the twelfth century onwards, many Bhakti movements arose in various parts of India. In South India, the Lingayat movement started by Basavanna in Karnataka challenged caste distinctions. The Varkari movement in Maharashtra founded by Saint Dyaneshwar and Saint Namdeo emphasised the message of social equality. In North India, Bhakti movements led by Saint Kabir and Saint Ravidas, as well as Sikhism founded by Guru Nanak, challenged Brahmins and rejected caste and untouchability. Although the Buddhism and Bhakti movements challenged the caste system, they did not provide systematic analyses of caste-based inequality and oppression; it was only during the 18th and early 19th century, when the East India Company defeated Peshwa rulers and established its rule over western India, that such analyses became possible.

The East India Company undermined the importance of caste and brought a rule of equitable law onto Indian soil. However, Brahmins owing to their high level of literacy, English language skills, and familiarity with the new administrative procedures, occupied the clerical and professional positions at all levels of the British administration. British rule, thus, added political and administrative power to the religious authority of Brahmins (Dirks, 2001, p. 10; see also O'Hanlon, 1985). Although the East India Company did not pave way for the education of lower castes, it certainly widened the opportunities for literacy and learning in the form of missionary schools. Importantly, the East India Company (not intentionally) introduced the Western discourse of democracy and human rights in the Indian context, providing fertile ground for social change in Indian society.

Mahatma Phule (1826-1890) was a low-caste social reformer and intellectual from western India who pioneered the systematic analysis of caste-based exploitation and tyranny of Brahmins (for details of Phule's life and work see Keer, 1997). Long before Michel Foucault (1980), Phule analysed the nexus between knowledge and power that enabled the hegemony of Brahmins in Indian society and within British administration (Bagade, 2006; O'Hanlon, 1985). Education, Phule stressed, was a "third eye", i.e., the foremost means to challenge exploitation, of downtrodden masses. Along with his wife Savitribai Phule, he started the first ever school for Untouchables in the year of 1848, followed by the first ever school for women in the year 1851.

Phule's main argument was that Brahmins were Aryan invaders who had conquered the original inhabitants of India; the lower castes represent the exploited and oppressed mass conquered by Brahmins. By arguing that Brahmins were Aryan invaders, Phule construed the caste system as a Brahmin construction to exploit lower-caste masses. The Aryan invasion theory also helped Phule "deny the legitimacy of Brahmanic religious authority, to assert the hidden *Kshatriya* identity of all lower castes, and to reinterpret the most important stories, figures, and symbols in popular Hinduism from a new and radical perspective" (O'Hanlon, 1985, p. 141).

Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seeker's Society) which later grew into a non-Brahmin movement against caste and untouchability. Phule also petitioned the British to curb the Brahmin influence within their administration. Phule was "one of the first Indians to forcefully introduce the values of freedom, equality and fraternity, as proclaimed by the French Revolution, into the Indian way of thinking" (Joshi, 1996, p. 3). Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956) later developed Phule's analysis with greater clarity and depth (for details of Ambedkar's life and work see Jaffrelot, 2005).

Ambedkar was born among Untouchables and represented their interests until his last breath. He was an important national leader, an erudite scholar, and played a key role in the making of modern India; his major contribution was his role as the chief architect of the Indian constitution. While Mahatma Phule introduced values of freedom, equality and fraternity in the Indian context, Ambedkar enshrined these in the Indian constitution. In Bhikhu Parekh's (2015) assessment, "Ambedkar was in some respects a deeper thinker and had a greater impact on his community and his country than Martin Luther King had on his" (p. 97). While Martin Luther King enjoys an iconic international status, Ambedkar remains a local and obscure figure owing to caste-based prejudices and India's relatively low international visibility. Even Mahatma Gandhi had a highly patronising attitude towards Ambedkar and mistook him as a Brahmin social reformer for many years (Desai, 1953)!

Ambedkar's analysis of the caste system was born in the crucible of his organic scholarship and personal experience of caste inequities. Ambedkar rejected Phule's Aryan invasion theory. He emphasised that lower castes neither constituted a separate race nor a distinct culture but rather an excluded part of a culturally homogenous society. Ambedkar located the origin of the caste system in the practice of endogamy adopted by Brahmins to elevate their social status (which was later imitated by non-Brahmin castes; Ambedkar, 2002). Ambedkar observed that caste is not just a matter of division of labour, but also a division of labourers into watertight compartments. Ambedkar argued that the unique form of inequality embedded in the caste system gives rise to the practice of untouchability (Ambedkar, 2002). He differed with Mahatma Gandhi on the best way to eradicate untouchability (for an insightful treatment of the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar see Nagraj, 2010). Gandhi relied mainly on appealing to Hindu conscience for the eradication of untouchability and did not ideologically, nor practically, seek to change the caste system in a fundamental way (Baxi, 1995; Palshikar, 1996). Ambedkar, however, saw untouchability as a necessary outcome of power relations structured by the caste system. Ambedkar called for the annihilation of castes to eradicate untouchability and build a society on the basis of democratic principles of equality, freedom and fraternity (Jaffrelot, 2005). The Dalit movement in India takes its inspiration from Phule and Ambedkar and aims to unite people to annihilate the caste system.

The social change in Indian society is often understood either as a consequence of Gandhian campaigns against untouchability (e.g., Parekh, 1999) or as "Sanskritisation" by lower castes (i.e., efforts to emulate upper-caste religious and cultural practices to elevate one's lower-caste status; Srinivas, 1962). However, both of these approaches fail to recognise the autonomy and agency among lower castes to initiate efforts of social change. It is only recently that the intellectual elite in India has started to pay attention to the role of Dalit assertion in social change in Indian society. Dalit assertion refers to the efforts by Dalits to challenge the inequality and oppression by constructing a new dignified identity and an anti-caste ideology. In the last few decades, there has been a manifold increase in the assertion among Dalits. This increasing Dalit assertion is expressed through different forms, such as movements against caste domination, protest literature, political parties, a variety of grassroot assertions, and lately, middle-class activism (Pai, 2013).

Due to the increasing assertion among lower castes, and also due to the spread of democracy, caste is now perceived as something antithetical to values of decency and civility in urban and modern parts of the country. However, as Jaffrelot (2013) points out, "India is witnessing a paradox of continued caste violence against Dalits and liberal urge to make caste invisible in public places" (p. xi). According to official figures, there has been a steady increase in atrocities against Dalits and these incidents are not limited to rural contexts only (National Crime Records Bureau, 2013; National Human Rights Commission, 2004). Teltumbde (2011) notes that along with an alarming increase in numbers of caste atrocities, there is also a change in its motive and intensity:

> Earlier, atrocities were committed in the arrogance of impunity, for untouchables had no means of resistance; now they are committed in vengeance against dalit assertion. Earlier, atrocities were a manifestation of contempt; today they are a manifestation of the deep resentment of the 'privileges' Scheduled Castes get from the state… [atrocities] tended to be casual, more humiliating than injurious. Today, they are far more violent, more physically destructive and more brutal than before. (p. 31)

The presence of caste atrocities in modern and urban settings where traditional power relations have lost their hold and accompanied changes in motive and intensity are baffling social scientists. One of the major questions facing social scientists in India, Dalit activists, and other scholars of Indian society is what makes caste persist even amidst global and urban settings? As pointed out earlier, increasing Dalit assertion and its upper-caste response in the form of increasing caste atrocities forms a major reference point while answering this question. In this context, Cotterill and colleagues provide a somewhat counterintuitive explanation that the Hindu theory of karma works as a legitimising ideology for maintaining caste hierarchy.

Karma as a Legitimising Ideology

Cotterill et al. (2014) sought to extend the social dominance perspective of social hierarchy and oppression (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) in the Indian context. They present some interesting findings on how caste persists through the ideological justification of the caste system. Drawing upon the theoretical combination of Social Dominance Theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) and the dual-process model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002), they show that Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994) and Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981) predict the endorsement of karma beliefs as well as support for Hierarchy Enhancing (HE) policies, such as opposition to caste-based reservations and inter-caste marriage. The endorsement of karma beliefs was found to mediate the relationships between SDO and RWA and support for HE policies. The mediation of karma beliefs was significant even after controlling for generalised prejudice, suggesting an independent and unique mechanism of caste legitimation. Thus, Cotterill et al. showed that the Hindu belief of karma functions as a legitimising ideology in the Indian context. In other words, people disposed towards maintaining their dominance or authority over others are most likely to use karmic beliefs while opposing policies aimed at achieving social and economic equality.

This empirical evidence showing that karma functions as a legitimising ideology is intriguing. Cotterill and colleagues specify that they are looking at the Hindu conceptualisation of karma, namely *Sanchita*. However, in classical Hindu thought *Sanchita*, i.e. accumulated karma of the past, is not clearly separate from other aspects of karma, i.e. *Prārabdha* (portion of the past karma which is responsible for the present body) and *Āgāmi* (the coming karma which also includes the karma that is being gathered at present) (Mahadevan, 1971). Also, the classical Hindu thought regards karma and reincarnation as logical corollaries of each other such that belief in karma implies belief in reincarnation (Radhakrishnan, 1927). Although the concept of karma is strong within all "dharmic" faiths in the Indian context, karma is not always connected with reincarnation and does not always mean the same thing. Even within the Hindu tradition, certain sects believe in reincarnation but not in karma (i.e. they believe in reincarnation but not in the idea that there is a moral order connecting these reincarnations), whereas certain sects believe in karma but not in reincarnation (A. Sharma, 2001).

Ursula Sharma (2002) observes that although western commentators have often emphasised the role of karma in the legitimisation of the caste system, sociological and anthropological work on caste has found little evidence for this being the case. Referring to the work of Babb (1983) and Fuller (1992), Sharma emphasises that karma is less frequently used to justify one's social position than generally imagined. Furthermore, she adds that it is the higher castes who mostly use karma, whereas lower castes tend to take a sceptical view. Early social psychological research from India also supports Sharma's position. In a survey conducted among high- and low-caste university students, Paranjpe (1970) found that most participants in their sample did not believe in the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and lower caste students, in fact, reported higher levels of disbelief. This disbelief among lower castes is also corroborated by the fact that karma is rarely used in the discourse on caste by lower castes, especially Dalits (Jodhka, 2015). Charsley and Karanth (1998) assert that there would be very few Dalits today who would justify their low status on grounds of their misconduct in a past life. Cotterill et al.'s (2014) work certainly provides interesting empirical evidence in this context. Unfortunately, as the authors acknowledge, this empirical evidence is limited by the fact that the sample in the study is unrepresentative and the results might not be generalisable to the Indian population (see p. 109).

Consensus and Contestation Among Lower Castes

We are surprised by the fact that Cotterill and colleagues entirely ignored caste differences in the endorsement of karma. This is important as 33.5% of the sample self-categorised as belonging to a SC or ST caste category (Cotterill et al., 2014, p. 102). From the perspective of SDT, the endorsement of karma by lower castes thus reflects behavioural asymmetry suggesting "coordinated differences in the behavioural repertoires of dominants and subordinates that produce better outcomes for dominants than for subordinates" (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006, p. 279). The idea that a broad consensus among dominant and subordinated groups maintains a system of dominance is not new in the study of caste. Similar ideas have been proposed, scrutinised and subsequently contested in the caste literature; the most salient example is the work of Michael Moffatt (1979).

On the basis of ethnographic study among Untouchable communities in South India, Moffatt (1979) argued that a normative ideological/cultural consensus exists among higher and lower castes that maintains the caste system. The lower castes or Untouchables share with the higher castes the basic assumptions and values of the caste system and "recreate among themselves virtually every relation and institution from which they have been excluded for the reason of their untouchability" (p. 89). In other words, Moffatt claimed that Untouchables buy into the very ideology that devalues them and willingly participate in their derogation.

Moffatt's (1979) consensus model has attracted a lot of criticism. Subsequent anthropological research has highlighted distinctiveness, counter-culture, and resistance among Untouchable communities (see Deliege, 1992; Gellner & Quigley, 1995; Gorringe, 2005; Juergensmeyer, 1982; Khare, 1984; Mencher, 1974; Mosse, 1994). This research points out that Dalits do not readily accept the unclean and demeaning status assigned to them in the caste hierarchy and do not willingly participate in their subordination. The self-identification of erstwhile Untouchables as "Dalit" and consequent rejection of Mahatma Gandhi's paternalistic name "Harijan" itself is a strategy of differentiation and assertion (Guru, 2001). In contrast to Moffatt's claim of hierarchical relations being reproduced by Untouchables, studies also show an egalitarian emphasis in intra-group relations in Dalit communities (Gorringe, 2005). There is also evidence of Dalit counter-cultural rejection of the caste system and the existence of a distinct Dalit culture, represented in the origin myths, songs, and egalitarianism, which rejects upper-caste

norms and practices (Deliege, 1992). The Dalit movement is noted for its ability to produce autonomous cultural and political resources (Wankhede, 2008). For example, Suryakant Waghmore's (2013) brilliant ethnographic study of the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) and MHA (Manavi Hakka Abhyan – translated in English as Human Rights Campaign) in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra shows that their mobilisation at grass-root level were influential in creating spaces of democratic civility, even in the absence of strong leadership and a major social movement.

The criticisms and empirical evidence contradicting Moffatt's (1979) observations are clearly many. In social psychological terms, the counter-evidence to Moffatt clearly indicates that relations between high and low castes are not secure, and that lower castes do not identify with high castes (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979/2001). This decreases the likelihood of behavioural asymmetry among lower castes. Therefore, it is questionable whether lower caste participants in Cotterill and colleagues' study really supported anti-egalitarian policies. This also raises the issue of the extent to which individual differences rather than social processes can be useful to predict "social dominance".

Feeding a Conformity Bias?

Although we agree that the SDT perspective of social hierarchy and oppression has much to offer to the study of caste, we feel that the focus on specific tenets of the framework, such as ideological and behavioural asymmetry among lower castes, might do more harm than good. This is because psychological research on lower castes, especially Dalits, has ignored their attempts of resistance (Mishra, Akoijam, & Misra, 2009) and thus exhibited a strong conformity bias (cf. Moscovici, 1976). For example, in their study on attitudes and opinions of six caste groups, Rath and Sircar (1960) showed that lower-caste groups evaluated themselves negatively. Subsequent studies by Majeed and Ghosh (1989) also report a similar pattern of negative ingroup evaluation among SC participants, which they attributed to an "affective syndrome crisis" – a deep-seated, unresolved identity crisis. Similarly, Anant (1967) observed that the caste hierarchy was reflected in personality patterns among Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and Untouchables. He reports that compared with other caste categories, Untouchables have a "deficient personality" (Anant, 1967, p. 393). The literature is replete with such examples of "deficiency" or negative self-evaluation among lower castes.

Anthropological research on the Untouchable communities, as mentioned earlier, has a different take on how lower castes, especially Dalits, deal with their disadvantage. This literature contradicts the deficient picture of Untouchables in psychological research and demonstrates the presence of different intra-group coping strategies, as well as mobilisations for social change among lower castes (Hardtmann, 2009). Furthermore, significant psychological research suggests that it is uncommon to find concrete evidence of lowered self-esteem and negative ingroup evaluation in response to group disadvantage since individuals and groups often possess adequate resources to deal with their disadvantage (Crocker & Major, 1989; Leach, Mosquera, Vliek, & Hirt, 2010; see also Leach & Livingstone, 2015). It is clear that psychological research on caste has not paid enough attention to the fact that disadvantaged groups like Dalits might not internalise their devaluation willingly but develop strategies to overcome negative evaluation and protect their esteem (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979/2001).

We, therefore, firmly believe that an emphasis on ideological and behavioural asymmetry might feed an existing conformity bias, and more importantly, also contribute to the stigmatisation of lower castes. However, we do not deny that ideological and behavioural asymmetries exist between castes. Although Cotterill and colleagues do not present convincing evidence for its existence, we do acknowledge that the caste context is complex and that such dynamics may be present in specific geographical pockets in India. The real question is not whether ideological and behavioural asymmetry exists among lower castes but whether we want it to exist or not, and what we do to intervene (cf. Reicher, 2004).

Caste Is a Contested and Rapidly Evolving Reality

Another important issue that needs to be discussed is the way Cotterill and colleagues represent the caste system and caste classifications. They describe the caste system as a stable and rigid hierarchy consisting of four major groups, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Untouchables (Cotterill et al., 2014, p. 99). In fact, Shudras are the fourth group (*Varna*) and Untouchables are excluded from this hierarchy. What Cotterill and colleagues are referring to is the *Varna* model of caste propagated by orientalist scholars.

What is this *Varna* model of caste? The Rigveda, one of the oldest scriptures in India, describes the origin myth of *Varnas*, which uses the metaphor of the human body to explain the social stratification. It says that all four *Varnas* emerged from the body of the Brahma – the creator. The Brahmins (the priestly class) were born from the mouth; the Kshatriyas (the warrior class) were born from the hands, Vaishyas (the commerce class) from the thighs, and Shudras (the labouring class) from the feet. The Untouchables do not have a place on the body of Brahma. They are in fact an excluded part of the *Varna* system (but sometimes are referred to as the fifth *Varna*). The organs of the body (mouth, hands, thighs, and feet) are unequal and perform different and unequal functions; they are unique and cannot be replaced by one another, and they do not mix with one another. Similarly, *Varnas* (i.e., classes of people) are not only different, but unequal, not to be mixed, and have their specific function to perform in society. This origin myth propounded in the Rigveda almost three thousand years ago metaphorically explained the endogamy, difference, hierarchy, and division of labour in Indian society.

The *Varna* model is one of the most popular and simplistic version of the caste system propagated through Louis Dumont's (1980, 1991) influential theory of caste. Dumont (1991) perceived the caste system as "reducible to a single true principle, namely opposition of the pure and the impure" (p. 477). For Dumont, caste represented the institutionalisation of hierarchical values. He conceptualised the caste system as a relational system in which the "impurity of the untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman" (Dumont, 1991, p. 478). In the caste hierarchy, as defined by one's ritual status, Brahmins are at the top signifying the most pure whereas Untouchables are at the bottom signifying the most impure. Dumont's theory has been one of the most influential theories of caste. Dumont represented the caste system as a unified and consensual reality that spanned across India. Several scholars have noted limitations of Dumont's theory of caste. Most relevantly, it has been suggested that Dumont only provided a partial account (based on Hindu scriptures) of caste, propagated by Brahmins for their own benefit (Berreman, 1991). Dumont also ignored empirical evidence that did not fit his notions, and he somewhat exaggerated the unified nature of caste put forward in Hindu scriptures (Jodhka, 2015; Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma, 1994).

The *Varna* model is an ideological device for organising castes into larger status categories (U. Sharma, 2002). Although the *Varna* model explains social stratification in Indian society to a great extent, scholars emphasise that it is far from the reality on the ground. Each *Varna* consists of an internal hierarchy of smaller groups called *Jatis*. Although the *Varna* structure is uniform across India, the different internal groups are not (Dirks, 2001). In this sense, it is impossible to fit the social reality of these smaller groups into a single ladder that spans across India. The *Varna* model is thus a "book view of caste" whereas the *Jati* model is a "field-view", or the actual reality of caste (Béteille, 1996, p. 17).

The *Varna* hierarchy was fixed with the Brahmin on top and Shudra or the Untouchable at the bottom as emphasised by Dumont (1991). However, the local Jatis were more flexible and much more complex. In fact, there are multiple notions of hierarchy in the caste context resulting in contestation among different castes about who is high and who is low in various status hierarchies (Gupta, 2000; Jodhka, 2015). For example, although the *Varna* model puts Brahmins at the top of the hierarchy, the ethnographic reality on the ground contends any pan-Indian hierarchy. *Kirwant* Brahmins (a sub-caste) are considered "impure" because of their work as funeral priests (Srinivas, 2002). A few non-Brahmin castes from North India, such as the Gujjars, maintain their dominance over Brahmins both in a ritual and material sense (Raheja, 1988; see also Jodhka, 2015). From this perspective, caste is not a unitary and rigid structure that has survived 3000 years, but a contested and rapidly evolving form of human relations. The problem with employing a simplistic orientalist version of caste in psychological research is not only that it is factually incorrect but also that it helps propagate a version that is beneficial for the dominant group in society and ignores the everyday contestations of subordinate groups. In this sense, the *Varna* model of caste works as a legitimising myth itself.

RWA, Legitimising Myths and the Future Study of Caste

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of constructs like RWA, SDO, and legitimising myths while examining the Indian caste context. Growing evidence suggests that RWA does not always function as initially envisioned in non-American and non-Western contexts. For example, recent research shows that RWA, in fact, is related to support for hate-speech prohibition in Poland (Bilewicz, Soral, Marchlewska, & Winiewski, 2015) and multiculturalism in Singapore (Roets, Au, & Van Hiel, 2015). Our own unpublished data suggest that RWA is positively associated with opposition to Hindu nationalist violence against Muslim minorities in India (Khan, 2011). The items in the current study were arguably also "cherry-picked", and the authors did not delineate if the three underpinning components of RWA (i.e., conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission) were captured. Analyses in other intergroup contexts show that the three components explain prejudice differentially, with authoritarian aggression having the strongest association with prejudice (see Mavor, Macleod, Boal, & Louis, 2009). However, in saying this, we are not suggesting that RWA does not have any explanatory power in understanding intergroup relations in India. We, however, believe that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the function of RWA, and its three components, has to be more sensitive and specific to the Indian context before it is imported. This is because when two dominant and ideologically divergent political parties are pitted against each other at the national level, which is the case in India with regard to the rivalry between the INC (Indian National Congress) and BJP, what it means to conform to authority can have widely differing meanings, particularly when the political parties differ in their views and policies concerning low-status and minority groups.

We believe that the tenet of legitimising myths in an SDT framework of theory and research allows for contextual and cultural sensitivity in the study of social systems of hierarchy and oppression in different cultural systems; karma is indeed an important legitimising myth in Indian society. However, as discussed earlier, karma is used in different ways in different contexts, and whether it will entail the justification of oppression will entirely depend on the function that the concept serves within a particular intergroup context, for particular identity positions. Would we expect karma to be read as *Sanchita* in a Neo-Buddhist sample (erstwhile Untouchables converted to Buddhism under Ambedkar's leadership) in India? The idea of karma in *Navayana*, i.e. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, is not only different from classical Hindu thought but also from traditional Buddhism (Rodrigues, 1993). We, therefore, think that in operationalising legitimising myths, it is key to first examine how they are constructed, embedded within, and contested by social groups so as to gain a dynamic understanding of the context and processes leading to their genesis, and thereby their intended and actual functions; it is only then that researchers can gain a complete understanding of the dynamics of social hierarchy and oppression (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Overall, we maintain that any examination aimed at better understanding of any social system that upholds hierarchy and oppression in any given cultural and/or social context needs to include the study of the construction of social identities, both in terms category boundaries and content – who they include versus exclude, and what it means to belong. Although criticisms of SDT and SDO along these lines are not new (for an extensive debate see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2003; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003; Wilson & Liu, 2003a, 2003b) we believe that SDT and SDO undoubtedly will gain more explanatory power towards understanding the underpinnings of oppression and prejudice insofar as the construction and contestation of social categorisations and identities are taken into account.

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