



Original Article

Shadows of the Past: Unmasking Caste, Gender, and Class in the Modern World

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Abstract

The continuation of historic social hierarchies in modern social and economic frameworks is critically examined in this essay. By arguing that caste, gender, and class hierarchies have not been eliminated but rather experienced a discursive transformation, it challenges the prevalent modernist concept of linear development. Despite being supposedly missing from their legitimising beliefs, these systems of hierarchy now appear in the form of a phantom persistence that haunts contemporary institutions. To break down the mechanisms behind this continuous upkeep, the present research employs a theoretical method that combines post-structuralist interpretation alongside an intersectional viewpoint. It explores the ways in which caste is transformed into cultural capital, how the logic of global capitalism conceals and embeds gendered disparities, and how the governmental nature of neoliberalism normalises divides between classes. The article makes the case that in order to genuinely rethink these classifications, a theoretical analysis of the language of identity, merit, and advancement that underpins their modern functioning is required. It comes to the conclusion that in order to challenge these spectral hierarchies, it is necessary to expose their co-constitutive structure and question the fundamental presumptions of the contemporary subject.

Keywords: Social Hierarchy, Intersectionality, Caste, Gender, Class, Modernity

Introduction

The narrative of contemporary society is frequently presented as one of advancement. In the context of this narrative, a more equitable society based on equality, freedom, and one's own merit gradually replaces the inflexible, unjust systems of the past. Traditional hierarchies such as rigid roles for men and women, the hierarchy of castes, and definite social strata are viewed in this perspective as archaic remnants that inevitably vanish as countries grow economically advanced, highly educated, and urbanised.

But a more nuanced portrayal emerges when we examine the world around us more closely. The article makes the case that such societal disparities have only changed how they appeared rather than disappeared. Class, gender, and caste collectively have shown remarkable adaptability to contemporary society, functioning in complex and frequently undetectable ways. Even in organisations that pride themselves on being equitable and accessible to all, they continue to exist like shadows, determining realities, impacting possibilities, and forming identities.

The purpose of the present research is to provide some insight into this procedure. The present article will examine how our contemporary social and economic frameworks might unknowingly (and occasionally purposefully) perpetuate historical inequities using the instruments of critique of social theory. It will contend that in order to create a society that is truly equal, we first need to understand the manner in which certain "shadow hierarchies" operate. We must discover the secret ways that historical events persist to influence our present if we are to rethink our social environment.

Objective of the study

This research paper's primary objectives are to:

1. Contest the straightforward notion that historic inequality issues are simply resolved by modernity.
2. To demonstrate how caste still functions subtly in modern society using critical perspectives.

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3. To illustrate how many types of disparities overlap and support each other using the intersectionality notion.
4. To look at how internet culture and contemporary capitalism produce new spaces where these established hierarchies are simultaneously reinforced and questioned.

Research Methodology

The following article's methodology is centred on a thorough examination and synthesising of current scholarly concepts and findings; it is a work of theoretical criticism rather than an empirical investigation with newly collected information. This method entails a critical examination of seminal works by intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and B.R. Ambedkar who have examined power, identity, and inequality. Additionally, it uses a conceptual examination of contemporary concepts like "empowerment," "individualism," and "merit" to show how these concepts may conceal inherent inequality. The general strategy is to combine various conceptual strands spanning post-colonial philosophy, feminist theories, as well as sociology to create a thorough yet cohesive case to demonstrate how established hierarchies change to accommodate emerging scenarios.

Discussion

1. The Contemporary Caste Clothes: Transitioning through Ceremonial into Societal Prestige:

Caste identities were supposed to vanish in the faceless combining pot of economic markets and urban society in contemporary society. Nevertheless, caste has shown itself to remain a highly flexible framework of society, evolving beyond a system predicated on the purity of ritual to one predicated on societal, electoral, and financial resources. Even though some of its most blatant and violent manifestations might be less obvious in cities, its impact is nevertheless widespread.

Maharashtra's politics provide a striking illustration of such. Caste factors continue to have a significant impact on the politics of states. The demands for quota have been centred on the Maratha community, a politically influential and numerically dominating group, demonstrating how caste identification continues to be a key axis in political mobilisation. Political coalitions are frequently formed based on their capacity to unite vote banks from particular caste sections, which include the Dalits, Marathas, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), in addition to their shared ideologies. A careful equilibrium of different caste considerations is often seen in the allocation of electoral candidates and ministerial seats. This proves that the practice of caste continues to exist despite in the purportedly contemporary and secular field of parliamentary democracy; rather, it has evolved into a tool for acquiring and retaining political wealth.

Besides the political arena, this change is also occurring in the business and social spheres. Caste linkages are important in the urban labour market, according to anthropological research. People from marginalised caste origins are disadvantaged irrespective of their skills due to the restrictive climate created by dominant-caste structures, which frequently serve as unofficial avenues for professional

progression and employment recommendations (*Thorat & Newman, 2012*). Additionally, this "old" structure has flourished on emerging platforms made possible by modern technology. By enabling consumers to narrow their search for possible spouses by their particular sub-caste, matrimonial websites—which are symbols of contemporary matchmaking—paradoxically encourage caste endogamy, illustrating how contemporary technologies may be utilised to uphold established boundaries (*Cassan, 2015*). Thus, caste continues to exist as a constantly evolving and potent matrix influencing contemporary circumstances rather than as a legacy.

2. Taking a Comprehensive View: The Interconnected Character of Gender Discrimination:

Discrimination cannot be understood by focussing on a single issue at one point. Here, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (*1991*) concept of intersectionality is essential. It demonstrates the way structures of authority, such as casteism, classism, and sexism, intersect and produce distinct, intensified instances of discrimination. One of the main dimensions for inequalities is still gender, a factor which is frequently normalised and rendered unnoticed in the public as well as the private sectors.

Even though the contemporary Indian market seems to provide chances for everyone, the Government of India's statistical data shows a significant gender imbalance. In 2022–2023, India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate (*FLFPR*) was a mere 37.0%, reported the results of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (*PLFS*). This small percentage is a clear sign of systemic obstacles, such as the overwhelming amount of unpaid household labour. Oxfam International (*2020*) estimates that 3.26 billion hours of carer work without compensation are performed daily by Indian women and girls. Often referred to as the "second shift," this issue puts women into "time poverty" by preventing them from pursuing leisure, paid employment, or academic pursuits, which furthers their personal financial reliance (*Hochschild & Machung, 2012*).

The stratification persists throughout those women who get beyond these obstacles and join the workforce. The disparity in male and female salaries still exists, and women are still disproportionately under-represented in roles of responsibility. For instance, women make up just under fifteen percent of the total number of Lok Sabha's seats as well as a correspondingly tiny portion of the governing bodies of leading Indian corporations. From preventing access into the labour market to restricting promotion within it, bias based on gender functions at all tiers, as this data clearly illustrates, generating an actual situation that is far different from the contemporary ideal of gender equality.

3. The Persistent Shadow of Class: The Myth of Equal Opportunity:

A philosophy that places a strong emphasis on personal accountability and achievement has an enormous impact on today's modern society. Yet, this portrayal frequently overlooks the significant and long-lasting influence of an individual's class origin. The profoundly asymmetrical ability to access essential necessities like



medical care and schooling is a clear indication of the long-lasting impact of the class structure on the community.

There is a divide between underfunded government educational institutions and prestigious privately owned educational institutions in Indian cities. In addition to academic education, elite private institutions foster the development of societal resources, which includes the connections, self-assurance, and cultural competencies necessary for achieving success in the workplace. Students from families with lower earnings, on the other hand, frequently go to schools with inadequate facilities and teacher shortages, resulting in an institutional barrier that is practically impossible to get around via personal initiative alone (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Class patterns are perpetuated throughout decades thanks to this academic apartheid.

In India, there is a significant socioeconomic divide in having accessibility to high-quality medical facilities. Low-income people must rely on a government-run healthcare system that is overworked and inadequately funded, whereas those with financial resources have access to top-notch private healthcare facilities. Differences in longevity as well as the quality life experiences are closely correlated with these discrepancies in accessibility. Beyond that, new types of distinctions between classes are being created by the structure of contemporary capitalism. A newly insecure class of workers known as the "precariat" has emerged as a result of the "gig economy" (Guy Standing, 2011). These workers—freelance programmers, drivers who deliver goods, etc.—live in a state of perpetual fiscal instability and lack of job security, advantages, and the safeguards of traditional job opportunities. This demonstrates the manner in which class is being created in the latest and more unstable forms by contemporary economic dynamics rather than being eliminated.

Conclusion

In order to genuinely rethink caste, gender, and class, we as a community need to abandon the easy narrative that modernisation inevitably improves things. The truth is significantly deeper complicated. The traditional hierarchies of customs have not vanished; rather, they have evolved to blend seamlessly into our contemporary ideals of progress, individualism, and merit. They function as invisible but profoundly experienced undercurrents in the world around us.

The argument presented here has maintained the fact that in order to illuminate these shadows, a sceptical and cross-disciplinary perspective is required. The inequality between men and women in our employment, the caste framework's continued presence in politics, and the class split in education cannot be considered insignificant issues; rather, they are signs of more serious structural challenges. Seeking a single, easy solution is not the goal of reimagining our society. It is the ongoing and demanding task of exposing concealed discrimination, hearing the opinions of those who are marginalised, and creating institutions that are impartial and authentically equitable—not only in theory, but in reality.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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