

**Modernity and tradition in a global era: the re-invention of caste in  
India**

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## **Modernity and tradition in a global era: the re-invention of caste in India**

Conceptual paper

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - *this paper aims to explore the re-interpretation and justification of caste in India in the face of modernising influences and the efforts of legislators to disassemble its structures and traditions.*

**Approach** - *the concepts of de-traditionalisation and governmentality are deployed to illuminate the reconstruction of caste within the framework and imperatives of global industrial capitalism.*

**Findings** - *caste now has a different source of justification in that it serves the functions and needs of the 'winners' of globalisation at the expense of the 'losers'. In traditional caste-based society each caste moved in separate social spheres. This is simply not possible in a modern capitalist state based on a web of social, economic, and political inter-dependencies. This has the potential to cause social dislocation, threatening India's economic and social well-being and development. This paper demonstrates that whilst caste is still prevalent in Indian society it can no longer appeal to tradition for legitimacy.*

**Implications** – *resource distribution and the creation of an inclusive environment is a critical policy issue. The challenge for social policy in India is tackling the entrenched inequality of the caste system in its emerging, contemporary form. Equal opportunities will remain imaginary, unless India takes adequate steps towards capacity building in disadvantaged social groups.*

*Original value – de-traditionalisation and governmentality have so far only been applied to developed or Western nations. This paper uses these concepts to provide a critical account of an important social issue in developing nations.*

**Key words:** caste, de-traditionalisation, governmentality, India, social policy

## **Introduction**

India has spent the post-war era attempting to excavate the social inequalities of caste from its social landscape. The various dimensions of caste have been examined and connected with each other and to the past, whilst the consequences of caste have been widely researched (for example, Rao, 1981; Webster, 1999; Burnad, 2001; Chandra & Mitra, 2003, Gupta, 2005). As part of its modernisation programme, the Indian government has repeatedly attempted to legislate caste away. In doing this, the government has dug deep into the Indian cultural psyche to exorcise the tradition of caste. These attempts have run in parallel with the broader social and cultural effects of modern industrial Western capitalism on deeply held traditions, for example, the rapidly changing lifestyles of increasing numbers of Indians employed in the burgeoning information technology, bio-technology, and pharmaceutical sectors.

The tradition of caste in India dates back 3000 years. It is a hierarchical system which divided the population initially into four (that later grew into five) mutually exclusive, exhaustive, hereditary, and occupation-specific Varnas (translated into English as castes) (Deshpande, 2000), dictating all aspects of a person's existence. These are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors and royalty), Vaisyas (traders), and the Sudras (menial jobs) and the Ati Sudras (performing the lowest of menial jobs) (Deshpande, 2000; Thekaekara and van der Gaag, 2005). Whilst the caste system in India originated as a way of dividing labour, Thekarekara & van der Gaag (2005) contend that it was and is a method of exercising and maintaining social control.

The economically and socially disadvantaged castes are classified as the Scheduled castes (SC) accounting for approximately 160 million people (Burnad, 2001). People belonging to the SC can aspire to become teachers, government workers, or politicians but rarely a judge, lawyer, senior company executives or journalists (Ghose, 2003). The SC were named 'Harijans' by Gandhi, meaning Children of God, a term now considered pejorative. People of the SC prefer to be known as 'Dalits' or the oppressed, a term first used by Babasaheb Ambedkar (Gupta, 2005). The present day meaning of Dalits denotes people who are struggling for human rights, for a new identity and pride (Webster, 1999; Burnad, 2001). Representing over one sixth of India's population Dalits suffer almost complete exclusion by a system of social order and containment.

It is clear that the Indian caste system has deep historical roots. However, contemporary trends such as the development of a 'Dalit' identity and political movement point to a transformation of the caste system and a diverging of perspectives on what the system represents and what its future should be. The next section explores these developments through the theoretical prisms of de-traditionalisation as proposed by Beck, et al. (1994) and governmentality (Rose, 1999). The significance of this is that so far, the concepts of de-traditionalisation and governmentality have largely been used in the literature to examine Western societies and have yet to be widely applied to provide insights into the social, economic, political, and cultural effects of modernisation on newly industrialising nations such as India. It is argued here that such concepts are equally useful in both contexts.

In examining the changes to traditional Indian society, the works of Beck, Giddens & Lash (1994) and Rose (1999) are deployed to provide theoretical insights and analytical structure. Whilst their ideas have so far been applied to explaining the transformation of Western industrial nations, the same processes and forces driving this transformation (eg globalisation) are being brought to bear on 'developing nations' such as India. According to Giddens (1994), tradition is a way of settling clashes between different values and ways of life. Once a particular set of values is selected by a society, they form a prism through which the world is viewed by that society. Tradition thus incorporates power relations between social groups and tends to naturalise them. The world of traditional society is one in which cultural pluralism takes the form of a diversity of mores and customs, each of which exist in their own space. The modernisation of India is resulting in a decline of such traditional influences in society. This process is referred to by Beck (1998: 132) as 'de-traditionalisation', which he defines as, 'the exhaustion, dissolution, and disenchantment of the collective and group-specific sources of identity and meaning [for example, caste, ethnicity, class consciousness] of industrial society'. Whilst this definition directly refers to the dissolution of Western industrial society (dubbed reflexive modernisation by Beck, 1994), it is equally applicable to the transformations taking place in Indian society. The forces of reflexive modernity are dissolving the traditional social relationships within Indian society as defined by caste causing the system to collapse. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) this is because the sources of collective and group identity and meanings that characterised traditional social relationships (class, caste, ethnic identity) whose lifestyles and notion underpin the economy, society and culture, lose their mystique and break-up, exhausted. However, Gupta (2005) argues that although the caste system has dissolved, caste identity has

strengthened, calling into question the idea that group identity and meanings have disintegrated. Beck and Beck-Beck-Gernsheim's (2005) argument must therefore, be re-thought in the context of caste in India.

Of particular relevance to India is the argument mounted by Giddens (1994) that de-traditionalisation causes the stripping of successions of generations of the central significance of the past as one of the main means for the transmission of conventional symbols and practices. In this case, one might expect that traditional social practices such as caste would become weaker in their influence. However, as Beck et al. (1994) point out, as traditions dissolve, the past takes on a new and quite different significance as emotional inertia, a kind of socio-cultural baggage. It should come as no surprise then that as India modernises, many traditions are clung to, and caste is one such tradition. As a result, caste has not and cannot simply be blanked out. It is being re-invented and justified in the present as a necessary and inevitable feature of a modern capitalist society. The notion of de-traditionalisation as detailed by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002) is correct in that the lifestyles and ideologies that characterise caste in India have broken-down. However, in contrast to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the sources of collective and group identity and meanings that characterise caste have strengthened rather than weakened as competition between and within castes for economic and political power has developed. To understand this process, de-traditionalisation is connected to Rose's (1999) concept of governmentality to provide a useful theoretical framework for analysis.

## **De-traditionalisation and governmentality**

Employing de-traditionalisation and governmentality as analytical tools means that the formation and transformation of control in all its guises are brought into focus for investigation. This is important because the social, economic and cultural transformations taking place in contemporary India are raising a number of challenges to government, especially in terms of reconciling the forces of modernisation with the immovable tradition of caste. This section is divided into two parts. Firstly, the transformations taking place to caste are discussed through employing concepts associated with de-traditionalisation and governmentality. In terms of de-traditionalisation, three central ideas are used: structural reflexivity, self-reflexivity and institutional reflexivity (Lash, 1994a; 1994b). Rose's (1999) notions of faculty of control (exercise of self-restraint), degree of consciousness (reflection), and force of habit (reflexivity) are then used to focus on the relationships between people, and between people and social structures in post-traditional society in the context of the de-traditionalisation of caste.

The second section examines the issue of caste from a governmentality perspective to analyse that which Rose (1999) refers to as endeavours deployed to shape, guide, and direct the conduct of others. According to Rose (1999), governmentality provides a way of taking full consideration of the ways in which people are educated and encouraged to self control through various mechanisms (eg the market, the law), agencies (eg health, education, police) and techniques (eg self government). This brings into question the means by which consent is manufactured for the continuation of caste as an organising principle in Indian society. In doing so, this research addresses caste as, 'that dimension of ... history composed by the invention,

contestation, operationalisation and transformation of more or less rationalised schemes, programmes, techniques and devices which seek to shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends' (Rose 1999: 20).

From this perspective, governing caste may be seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that includes a variety of thoughts and actions. Rose (1999) argues that these dimensions of governing are reflected in the multitude of words used to describe and enact it (eg education, control, influence, regulation, administration, management, guidance) and the multitude of connected authorities and forces involved in governing caste. Governmentality is thus brought into play to provide insights into how caste has been problematised, the different perspectives, and the ultimate aims of social, political, and cultural strategies utilised to govern its de-traditionalisation.

#### *The de-traditionalisation of caste*

**Structural reflexivity** - Structural reflexivity refers to where people are set free from the limitations of social structures. This means that they are able to critically reflect on the rules and resources of existing social structures and how these affect their social conditions of their existence; they can then begin to create their own rules. The development of structural reflexivity is related to the advance of self-consciousness in that, as Rose (1999) argues, people become more aware of their social situation and develop a critical awareness of their place in society. They are now becoming more willing to question the social system that keeps them in the lower strata of society.

Ram (2004) examines traces the rise of Dalit identity and consciousness in the Punjab as they asserted their rights to freedom from oppression, political representation, and

economic and social equality. Through the development of newspapers devoted to Dalit issues, the founding of Dalit political parties, and the assertion of Dalit culture, Ram (2005) demonstrates how the Dalits set themselves free of the social structures of caste that served to limit their life-chances and civil liberties.

**Self-reflexivity** - Self-reflexivity refers to the process by which, in creating their own rules for existence, people reflect on themselves (Giddens, 1994). People must make decisions based on a set of rules that only they can formulate, based on the knowledge they have accumulated about themselves and the world. However, this knowledge is itself in a state of continuous renewal and re-definition in response to the accumulation of knowledge and social interaction. Previous external monitoring, in which many aspects of a person's identity were given or taken-for-granted, dissolves and is replaced by self-monitoring in which people develop the freedom to organise their own biographies. Self-reflexivity provides a way of operationalising Rose's (1999) assertion that governmentality draws attention to how control has become a more personalised phenomenon. Rose (1999) refers to self-government as the contemporary means of maintaining social order.

Gupta (2005) outlines the personalisation of caste in terms of a struggle for individual life chances through access to education, the job market, and positions of power. Gupta (2005, p.414) argues that caste identities have changed to the extent that 'it is now a question of self over others and not self in relation to others' meaning that the caste system is now more a matter of power rather than ideology. Although caste as a formal system has collapsed, contemporary India still embraces caste as a means of social control through competition for status, wealth, and power between castes

driven by caste identity and competition for status, wealth, and power between individuals within castes.

**Institutional reflexivity** - Institutional reflexivity is different in that rather than focusing on individuals, it refers to a collective form of reflexivity. Just as people have become reflexive, institutions have also become reflexive in that they monitor and control their own performance, adjusting their practices repeatedly in response to changed circumstances or information (Lash, 1994a; 1994b). As institutions make such continual adjustments, in spite of the efforts of those within institutions to plan and achieve outcomes, what transpires is not necessarily what was intended, nor is there necessarily an awareness of what is actually taking place and its consequences. The uncertainty and insecurity arising from institutional reflexivity undermines the capacity of institutions to exert control as their collective power is dissipated by the fragmenting, ever changing, and increasingly complex environment in which they must operate. Institutional reflexivity provides a way of gaining a deeper understanding of why caste has withstood the rising tide of Western influences brought about by the globalisation of India. It is found that in spite of the best efforts of the major political institutions of India, caste identity has strengthened taking the form of a reflexive habit (Rose, 1999).

Caste is a strong and enduring feature of Indian society in spite of the constitution outlawing it and supporting legislation. It is enduring because as Lash (1994: 202) argues, 'traditions are bound up with collective memory, itself a framework for the reconstruction of past time which in turn organises future time'. On the surface then, caste seems very 'traditional' in that it has a long history and deeply engrained in

Indian culture and society. We contend that rather than being a tradition, caste is a social compulsion in that compulsiveness is an inability to escape from the past. Caste looks like a tradition in that it depends on formulaic truths and repetition, but has become shorn of integrity, disconnected from emerging Indian consumption cultures closely aligned to a global attitude, particularly evident amongst young people (Jackson, 2004; Lukose, 2005). As an emerging global consumption culture directly challenges caste, one might expect to see the caste consciousness begin breaking down as previously separate social spheres overlap and merge rather than strengthen. A clue to the persistence of caste in India lies in the way it is being re-invented and justified within the new global consciousness. The new caste consciousness conforms to the logic of the new global social architecture identified by Held and McGrew (2002: 81) as one which, 'divides humanity into elites, the bourgeoisie, the marginalised, and the impoverished, re-arranging the world into the winners and losers of globalisation'.

The contemporary challenges to caste come from that which Giddens (1994) identifies as the development of the self as the basic characteristic of everyday life in the modern world and as such, there has to be a significant measure of individual autonomy. However, Giddens (1994) also argues that this requires the development of purely personal relationships between people in post-traditional society rather than the collective relationships of traditional society. These new personal relationships depend on an intimacy not generally characteristic of traditional society. This goes against and across the grain of caste. In contrast to traditional practices of totally separate social spheres of caste, the socio-economic imperatives of capitalist production means that the so-called 'higher castes' cannot escape their connection

with the 'lower castes' and one might expect that this inescapable social mixing would result in a destruction of caste as a means of social, economic, political, and cultural separation and control. Rather than being destroyed, caste is transformed. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue that de-traditionalisation is not only a destruction of tradition it also involves the reconstruction of traditions either in terms of the invention of new ones or the reinvention of old ones. In the case of India the traditional practices of caste have indeed not disappeared from the Indian social, cultural, political, and economic landscape, instead it has been re-invented, re-structured, and re-justified within the context of global capitalism. The global, propositional truths of modernity (Giddens, 1994), are being appropriated by Indians in everyday life. It is contradictory then that whilst modernity works to effectively disembed traditional meanings of caste, rendering it anachronistic to modern Indian society, it remains an indelible feature of the social, cultural, and political landscape. Insights into how this has come about is provided by governmentality. The next section brings into focus the different perspectives and strategies employed on governing caste as well as how caste has been problematised.

### *The governmentality of caste*

The main expression of how caste is problematised in India is found in recent reports and research papers. The report by the Human Rights Watch (1999) highlights significant economic and educational disparities between lower and higher-caste communities. Further research also defines caste as problematic particularly with regards to the plight of people who are assigned as being Dalit (Webster, 1999; Deshpande, 2000; Chandra & Mitra, 2003). Dalits are defined as being both socially and economically disadvantaged, with only 15 percent being literate (Burnad, 2001).

They are treated by wider Indian society as ‘untouchable’ and thus deprived of equal access to resources such as water and health care facilities. According to Burnad (2001), Dalit people are not allowed to take baths in common wells or to sit on a par with other castes and they have no right to avail themselves of the services such as public transport, parks or hotels. Moreover, children face a higher incidence of malnutrition whilst every Dalit-born woman faces the triple discrimination of class, gender, and caste. Population programmes of the state targets Dalit women for forced sterilisation. As agricultural workers, women are paid half that of a man’s salary. Indeed, Dalit women are Dalits among Dalits. Caste has been problematised through being defined in terms of institutionalised discrimination. As such, the different perspectives regarding caste may be seen in terms of those who see the inequalities associated with caste as being unacceptable and those who see caste as a means of maintaining the economic and social status quo of perceived stability and progress.

The different perspectives on caste are a reflection of nearly 60 years of India’s post-colonial independence. Research conducted between 1993 and 1994 reveals that even in more egalitarian states such as Kerala, inter-caste disparity continues to underlie overall social inequality (Deshpande, 2000). Anti-caste radicals such as Dr Ambedkar and Periyar Ramasamy have adopted – at state level – a socialist perspective, demanding that India must redefine its socialist project of multiculturalism and focus on addressing the multiple inequalities within Indian society (Rajadurai, Geetha & Ahmad, 1997). Gupta, R.K. (2005) contends that the winning of the national elections by the Congress Party in 2004, represents a populist backlash against economic reforms that benefited a privileged minority of the 1.1 billion people of India whilst ignoring a larger community who remain illiterate and

impoverished. In modern India, capital, culture, and the state exist in a cluster of alliances founded on caste hierarchies, and ethnic and religious differences. In recent years, capital growth has created a further divide between and within the hierarchical caste structure (Rajadurai, et al., 1997). This is creating increasing pressures within India for reform.

The different perspectives discussed here reveal two opposing views on caste. The first is one in which caste is seen as a manifestation and justification of historical social inequalities in India and as such has no place in a modern society. In contrast, the other perspective is one in which caste inequalities are a necessary and inevitable (some would argue desirable) consequence of modern capitalism. The emerging social architecture requires groups of people who are poor and marginalised as well as those who prosper. In India this social architecture is expressed in the caste system.

The major sources of strategies employed in relation to caste have come from the Indian government. The development of a constitutional and legislative approach to governing the problem of caste had the aim of outlawing discrimination and providing legal protection for people of lower caste. Article 17 of the Constitution of India proclaims Untouchability an offence. Article 35 (a) (ii) confers upon Parliament the exclusive power to make laws prescribing punishment for those acts which are declared to be offensive to SC. In pursuance of Act 35 of the Constitution, the Untouchability (offences) Act, 1955 was passed. The Untouchability Act has since changed to the Protection of Civil Rights Act. Statutes such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 along with policy of reservation in public employment and education for upliftment of people belonging to

scheduled castes was enacted (Chandra & Mitra, 2003). The basic premise of these laws grants the assurance that Dalits would have the same rights as any other person, in using public amenities. These schemes are implemented through State Governments/Union Territories as Centrally Sponsored Schemes. Furthermore, developmental plans, such as the Special Component Plan were evolved as far back as 1979 to bring SC above the poverty line and into the mainstream of national life with equal social and economic status. This was accompanied by action in 1992 to eliminate the manual handling of soil and filth through the National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their dependents (Chandra & Mitra, 2003).

In the area of employment, the problem of caste is recognised and acted on. The government of India initiated affirmative action as a remedial measure with the objective of providing career opportunities for people from lower castes. All states of India have quotas for the Scheduled Castes that comprise 16-17 percent of the population. This means the reserving of 22.5 percent of: seats in the legislature, places at government-sponsored educational institutions, and public-sector jobs (Deshpande, 2000). Prominent private sector employers believe that reform policies such affirmative action will alleviate poverty, however the Dalits debate the misconception of reservation policy. They argue that it should not be seen as uplifting the poor, instead it should focus on reversing centuries of discrimination. Anand Teltumbde, a Dalit managing director of Petronet, states, 'It is not the disability of the Dalits but the disability of Indian society that necessitates reservation' (Overdorf, 2004: 43). However, as Rose (1999) points out, government is only one player in the wider process of governing. In the case of caste, other constituencies

need to be considered such as employers, public administrators, and law enforcement. These groups have often taken a quite different approach to the issue in that they either passively or actively resist the efforts of legislators.

As a result of the resistance of significant groups in Indian society, the regulation of caste has neither solved nor simplified the problem. The efforts of India to govern caste 'from above' conflict with the practices, logic, and habits of caste 'from below', resulting in a failure of policy. The non-enforcement of protective legislation perpetuates discriminatory employment practices, accentuating hereditary social order. Constitutional and statutory bodies, including the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, have repeatedly confirmed and decried the prevalence of abuses (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The practices of law enforcers such as the judiciary on caste discrimination demonstrate failure. In July 1998 in the state of Uttar Pradesh, an Allahabad High Court judge reportedly had his chambers purified with 'Ganga jal', water from the River Ganges, because it had previously been occupied by a Dalit Judge (Chandra & Mitra, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 1999). Other government authorities have actually facilitated continued discrimination. The potential of the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989, to bring about social change has been fraught by police corruption and caste bias, with the result that many allegations of caste crimes are not entered in police records. Moreover, ignorance of procedures and a lack of knowledge of the act have also affected its implementation. In a Parliamentary hearing, it was cited that only 2 out of 30 police officials were familiar with the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955 (Chandra & Mitra, 2003). In the area of employment, in spite of policies such as affirmation action being enacted, Dalit

leaders allege that high-caste officials responsible for recruitment and promotions leave positions vacant rather than hire or promote those they view as inferior, then justify themselves to superiors by claiming they could not find suitable low-caste candidates (Overdorf, 2004).

Whilst the passing of laws hold some influence, caste continues with very little changes in the living standards of Dalits. According to Chandra & Mitra (2003) despite protective legislation and positive discrimination improvements in occupational mobility and living standards, the majority continue to be worse off than members of other communities. In literacy rates as compared to the national average figures is below 37 percent, and yet again women in the SC community are at an even greater disadvantage. Furthermore, it has been asserted, that some state governments dominated by higher castes have attempted to repeal legislation altogether (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Dalits have responded to ill-treatment by converting, en masse, to Buddhism, Christianity, and sometimes Islam (Webster, 1999). Once converted, however, many lose access to their scheduled-caste status and the few government privileges assigned to it. Many also find that they are ultimately unable to escape treatment as 'untouchables.' Indeed it would be difficult to convince Dalits that, over fifty-four years after independence, the government had done anything to end the violence and discrimination that has ruled their lives.

These practices do not repudiate the achievement which legal reforms aim to accomplish, instead they serve to demonstrate the insufficiency in relation to contemporary challenges. Furthermore, such orientations serve to highlight the lack of integrated programmes, weak implementation and a failure to mainstream

disadvantaged communities and repressed people, such as Dalits, into the national development process. This lack of adequate community development demonstrates that whilst the modernisation of India has had the effect of de-traditionalising many areas of the Indian social, cultural, and political milieu, it still remains addicted to caste. This seriously hampers the progress of 160 million of India's citizens ultimately negatively affecting the nation's standing as a global citizen, and its economic, social, and political stability and well-being.

Caste in India, has not been destroyed by modernisation in spite of the efforts of legislators. The perspectives provided by Beck et al. (1994) and Rose (1999) together help explain the processes at work. The concept of de-traditionalisation illuminates the way in which caste has been transformed from an ancient tradition of social organisation to a modern habit, evacuated of its traditional meanings and functions. Instead it has been re-made as caste consciousness in the mould of the emerging global social architecture. Rose's (1999) notion of governmentality has provided insights into the way this re-making has taken place. Using governmentality, caste may be seen as a way of organising the socio-economic structures of India to mirror Western industrial capitalism in a way that is least disruptive to the current social, political, economic, and cultural power structures. Those who were denied wealth and prosperity in the past will also be those denied it in the future.

## **Discussion**

The modernisation of India has created the situation where the 'tradition' of caste has been evacuated of its ancient connections with social and economic stability and order and has become a modern state of caste consciousness that is at best a habit and at

worst and addiction. The issue that has not yet been addressed in India though is the stark difference between traditional caste structures and their modern equivalent. The work by Beck et al. (1994) and Rose (1999) draw attention to this point of difference. It is now clear is that the so-called 'higher castes' cannot escape their connection with the 'lower castes'. Traditionally, castes were completely apart, moving in separate spheres. Now, they are bound together in a shared community of fate mapped out through engagement with global economic, social, cultural, and political institutions and structures.

This is recognised by prominent Indian authority figures. Nilekani, chief executive of the software-services giant, Infosys Technologies, has a stated recruitment program that does not discriminate on the basis of age, gender or caste (Overdorf, 2004). The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, stated recently that, 'If a commitment to remain an open society is one of the pillars of India's nationhood, the other is our commitment to remain an open economy – one that guarantees freedom of enterprise, respects individual creativity, and mobilises public investment for social infrastructure' (Singh, 2005: 14). Yet, in its quest towards capital growth, the move towards privatisation of public sector organisations takes precedence, resulting in a dwindling of reserved jobs and a shrinking of the public sector. Calls for private sector organisations to implement reform policies such as affirmative action become more strident. These initiatives are aimed at compelling businesses to implement poverty reduction reforms.

These statements imply that affirmative action is the way to improve the lot of lower caste. Using Rose's (1999) conceptualisation, the implication is that the lower castes

require assistance. They have the self-control to escape disadvantage; there is no 'culture of poverty' associated with the plight of Dalit people. However, if the Indian government and employers are committed to social reform and economic growth, then the question arises as to the role of consciousness and habit. Overdorf (2004) and Deshpande (2000) argue that while industrialists think the government should focus on uplifting the poor regardless of caste, Dalit leaders believe such a shift in emphasis would mean only that the lion's share of the benefits Dalits now enjoy would be transferred to poor members of the higher castes. As land is the prime asset in rural areas that determines an individual's standard of living and social status, lack of access to land makes Dalits economically vulnerable. The relationship of dependency is exploited by upper and middle-caste landlords. Furthermore, social reforms and policies such as affirmative action perpetuate the benefits of a privileged minority belonging to the backward and scheduled castes and tribes. This implies that whilst there is a reflective awareness of the issue of caste there is a reflexive habit of reverting to the (evacuated) tradition of caste amongst people of higher caste status.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments, strategies, and tactics employed in the governing of caste can be seen in terms of a privileged section of society protecting their own caste identity that brings advantages against a redefinition involving the creation of a more equal society that conflicts with their interests. In the past, the justification of caste was made valid through an appeal to tradition. In contemporary Indian society, this position is becoming less valid. A new justification has been invented appealing to the new 'tradition' of a capitalist global economic order in which the privileged continue to enjoy economic success at the expense of the poor and marginalised.

The key issues remain, that the governing of caste is a vexed issue for India evidenced in contradiction between top-down policy responses and the bottom-up entrenched logic and habits of caste perpetuated by those people who belong to higher castes. As a result, inequality remains the mainstay of India's social and economic system. Equal opportunities will remain imaginary, unless India takes adequate steps towards capacity building in disadvantaged societies. Furthermore, resource distribution and the creation of an inclusive environment remains a critical challenge.

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