

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**  
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Andre Beteille: A Social Stratification Perspective to Indian Society

Welcome back to the class again. In this class, we are going to discuss a very important sociologist, very interesting sociologist, Professor Andre Bette, who was born in 1934. And he was born to a French father and an Indian mother. And his work on Indian village is considered to be a pioneering one. So, Beteilie is somebody whom we need to discuss at length. So, we are devoting one session for him.

And one of the foremost theorists of social stratification in India. And one of the most important contributions of Beteilie is his theorization of Indian society on the basis of social stratification. And also, not following a structural functional perspective. So, let me also make it very clear that Beteilie does not belong to the school or the typical school like Srinivas who followed a structural functional perspective.

Rather, Beteilie adopted the theoretical formulation of social stratification as presented by Max Weber. And worked extensively on themes such as caste, inequality, and stratification. And employed a Weberian approach to the analysis of social change and social stratification. He was a student of M.N. Srinivas and studied in Delhi University, received a PhD from there. And then taught at distinct universities like Oxford University, Cambridge University, Chicago University and London School of Economics.

And then also taught in various prestigious departments in the country. So, considered to be very important scholar. And these are some of his important books. Caste, Class and Power, Changing Patterns of Social Stratification in a Tanjore Village. And this is again considered to be a classic work on Indian society.

So, any sociology student who does a course on Indian society will be made to read this. So, they have to ensure that they are familiar with this work. And then other essays and books including Caste, Old and New, Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification, Inequality and Social Change, Six Essays on Comparative Sociology, Social and Cultural

Reproduction of Caste, Kinship and Occupation in India, The Backward Classes in contemporary India, Antinomies of Society, Essays on Ideologies and Institutions, Sociology, Essays on Approaches and Methods. So, these are some of his important works. Now, Beteilie developed a sociology of caste different from that of Srinivas and Dumont.

So, this is Louis Dumont whom we are going to discuss extensively in the coming week. We will have I think some three or four lectures on Dumont, very elaborate lectures on Louis Dumont and Srinivas already we have discussed. So, the important thing about Beteilie is that Beteilie developed a unique perspective in difference or in opposition to that of provided by Srinivas and Dumont. Replacing Srinivas interest in social structure and the process of such as Westernization and Sanskritization with a focus on Weber's social stratification, he developed a new conceptual approach to make sense of social change in India. So, I hope you by now you are familiar with the argument that M.N.

Srinivas followed a structural functionalist perspective which basically looked at how social institutions work and how social institutions complement each other, how they contribute to the overall stability of the system. So, as I have repeatedly mentioned, structural functionalism is preoccupied with the question of social stability or social equilibrium. So, it has an inherent bias towards that, towards exploring and enquiring about the how a society maintains itself. And Beteilie moves away from that, and he basically wants to understand social change in India and as a general theory we have discussed, structural functionalism is not effective in addressing the phenomenon of social change. Though, you know, Parson in his letter writing tried to incorporate that, in general structural functionalism is seen as a theory not sensitive enough or not capable enough to explain why and how social changes take place.

Because it is preoccupied with the question of how society maintains itself and it has an ideological and even maybe even a bias towards that. On the other hand, Beteilie wanted to understand social change and he used the Weberian concept of stratification and Weberian concept of stratification as you might know, it was majorly different from that of Karl Marx who looked at social stratification primarily on the basis of class. So, if the Marxian perspective was class alone, because Marx believed that all other forms of stratification like say differences in social status, difference in power, differences in ritual status, all these things can be subsumed under class whereas for Weber, stratification is a combination of both class, political power and ritual status. So, Weber has a more exhaustive or a more comprehensive analysis of social stratification. He believes that in every society people are divided into different strata on the basis of all these combinations of people.

Whereas, Marx in a crude sense, he refused to recognize beyond a point the salience of power and ritual status, which he believed were subsumed under the overarching category of class. So, he wanted to look into that. Beteilie understands caste as a form of social stratification and focuses primarily on the material interest that caste simultaneously inhabits and also makes possible. So, Beteilie was rather interested in a kind of a material dimension of caste, the material factors that make, that provide salience to caste and the kind of a material interest that caste actually represent. So, he was less, of course he was concerned, but he was less concerned with the question of ritual purity and pollution, maybe unlike Dumont whom we are going to meet.

Because when we are discussing Dumont next class, we will see that how Dumont was completely preoccupied with the whole question of ritual purity and pollution. For him, material conditions were kind of epiphenomenon. They were kind of residual in their character, but for Beteilie, they were central. He also launched a sharp critic of Dumontian sociology, which you are not yet familiar, but we are discussing it from the coming class. Dumont's work by concentrating on the structures of traditional Indian society and the holism and hierarchy in it, left out many of the issues that are of the concern of modern India, material interest, economic and political and inequality.

And this point will become more clearer after next week. Louis Dumont gave so much of importance to the ritual dimension. And he did not look at caste as a system of stratification. He was not much bothered about its undesirable consequences of caste. He basically looked at it as a purely from a theoretical perspective, arguing that it is yet another form of, it should not be conflated with inequality.

That was his very strange argument. It is a different form of society that people must understand the kind of values behind it. But Beteilie was more clear that caste system is an example of social stratification with very specific material implications or material side effects. He does not dismiss the importance of Dumont's structural approach to caste, which is concerned with values and ideas, but only provides a comprehensive framework for studying material interest and changing social relations to understand caste from a different perspective, as a form of stratification, as I mentioned. So, he does not dismiss the importance of ritual hierarchy, which nobody does.

But the way in which Dumont went about reducing almost everything else into ritual hierarchy was very problematic. That is identified by Beteilie and Madan and a lot of other people. A lot of other people also had issue with the Dumont because he was not open enough or he did not really kind of acknowledge sufficiently the kind of inhuman aspects of caste system in India. For him, he tried to be a very distanced or dispassionate observer of the whole reality, rather than being sympathetic or being touched by the

stories of these people who are excluded. Caste, class and power, changing patterns of social stratification in a Tanjore village, this is, as I mentioned, one of the important works.

So, Beteilies perspective on caste from the fieldwork of social stratification is well articulated in this work. This is a work; he is revised version of his doctoral thesis based on his fieldwork in Sripuram. Again, it is a pseudo name, a village in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu in 1961 and 62. As we discussed in the previous class, most of this, almost every anthropologist use pseudo names. They would give only very broad indications to give some idea about where it is geographically located, mostly the name of the region or the district.

But they would desist from giving very specific illustrations about what, which exactly is a village because of concerns about privacy and other things. So, he explored the process of social change in Sripuram through three important social structures, the caste structure, the class system, and the distribution of power within that. So, it is a more structured analysis of a village. He looks at the caste structure as what Srinivas would have done. He also looks at the class system, looking into the ownership of land and other things and also the distribution of power within it.

So, for Srinivas, the latter two were not central to his characterization. And as I mentioned, it is a more readable, something like a novel like book, this remembered village, whereas Beteilies is a more systematic, rigorous account of this village Sripuram. Identify that change is a fundamental feature of the social structure of the village and provided an analytical scheme to understand social change. This again is something very interesting because Indian villages were seen as a place of no change in the colonial accounts. Indian villages were seen as isolated, Indian villages were seen as static, Indian villages were seen as unchanging, as if they were kind of frozen in time.

And this colonial account of Indian villages as the place of stability, place of known change was very, very influential. And Beteilie argues that that is not the case, especially after westernization, after the influence of modernity, there are rapid changes happening in the villages as well. The categories of caste, class and power refer to the different forms of social stratification as we mentioned. It directly follows Weberian engagement with Marxian understanding of stratification. Weber actually engages with the ghost of Marx as we know on several aspects about the nature of stratification, about the importance of religion, importance of ideologies and host of things.

And of course, Weber comes up with a more comprehensive analysis of social stratification. Now caste, stratification based on caste assumed greater importance than

those of class and power. So, Beteilies agrees that that caste as a social structure, as an institution was far more powerful than that of the power and class. The village was divided into Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Adi Dravida and it was the fundamental cleavage in its social structure. So, the village of course is a multicast village and every big multicast villages in South India would ideally represent caste between 10 to 20.

10 to 20 caste would ideally be present in almost every large multicast villages in South India. So, Sripuram also was not different. And the major three divisions were Brahmin, the non-Brahmin and the Adi Dravidas. Adi Dravidas are the ex-untouchables or the untouchables who belong, who fell outside the Varna system. In Weberian terms, caste constitutes status groups, which are normally communities, often of an amorphous kind, Weber.

Caste as a status group are defined essentially in terms of styles of life assigned specific roles, ritual values and economic positions. Something that we are familiar with how caste operate in specific rural setting. It is based on their styles of life, the culinary dietary forms and then rituals, practices, customs, which are very distinct from others and social roles, assigned specific social roles, including occupation, including things that are prohibited, things are permitted. So, every aspect of social life seems to be kind of regulated by the influence of caste, ritual values, and economic positions. Then class, another universal category, if caste is something confined to India or South Asia, class is a more broader universal category.

Although some scholars consider class not as a form of social stratification, but in terms of social conflict. See, Dahrendorf is a Marxian scholar, who argues that caste need not be always seen on the basis of the material basis, but on the basis of the position that they adopt at the time of stratification. Beteilie argues that in the context of Sripuram, landlords, tenants and agricultural labourers form the rank order of class, which is more or less tacitly recognized by all. So, on the one hand, you have Brahmins, then you have non-Brahmin upper caste, and then you have the Adi Dravida's, and this is caste. And when it comes to class, you have landlords, then you have tenants and then you have agricultural labourers, very threefold stratification in class as well.

Then very few number of people who own large amount of land, and then more number of people who work as the tenants in their land of the landlords, and then more number of people who work as landless labourers, who do not own any land, but who work in the land of either the tenants and that of the landlords, and they work as the major three classes which form the rank order. In the context of the agrarian social sector of Sripuram, classes are hierarchically arranged social categories based on broadly upon ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. And this is how caste class is

always defined. This is a classical Marxian definition that class is defined not on the basis of the wealth that you own. Of course, the wealth is a byproduct of that.

But class is defined as the ownership of the means of production. Bourgeoisie is a class that owns the means of production and proletariat is a class that who do not own the means of production. Of course, the old Marxian framework which has lost its kind of analytical rigour, at least in modern industrial societies. But when it comes to an agrarian society like Sripuram, this definition is very, very important. Those who own the means of production and those who do not own the means of production.

They are subdivided in terms of the types of ownership and control, the types of services contributed to the process of production. Based on this, a distinction between rentiers, farmers, cultivators, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers can be made out, but only at the conceptual level. They do not in reality comprise a discrete group since it is frequently found that a single person is both a rentier and a farmer, a sharecropper and agricultural labourer, etcetera. So, the categories about as cannot be seen as absolutely exclusive or watertight compartments because there is so much of fluidity between that a person could be also sharecropper, but also can be an agricultural labourer.

A person can be a rentier and also a farmer. So, it is not that a farmer who, somebody who only rents out his land for others to cultivate that, but he himself participate in this whole cultivation. Then comes the third dimension that of power. The distribution of power produces a hierarchy that is distinct from hierarchies of caste and class. This is a very fascinating argument. How does political power operate in a village setting? Is it a product of ritual hierarchy? Is it a product of class position? Is it a product of ownership of land or is it more, is it something more? That is a very, very fascinating question because power is something that is not, can be theorized that easily.

If you remember Weberian definitions of charisma, charismatic power or charismatic authority, anybody without any of the conventional qualities can assume charismatic power. That is a beauty of charismatic power. So, how does power operate in a village setting is what he tries to understand. Power has the more fluid character than caste or class as there is continuous shifts in the power structure. For this reason, it is not easy to define power adequately in terms of formal criteria.

So, how does a particular person, how do a group of people obtain power, retain power is a question that is more complicated than to understand the ritual position of different castes. Because ritual position is more or less stable as we have seen and class position is also more predictable easily, you can conceptualize easily, but power is much more fluid. However, here power following Weber is considered as the chance of a man or a number

of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participant in the action. The typical Weberian definition of power, that the ability of a person to impose his will over others despite their resistance, that is a classical Weberian definition of power. Now, power can be based on ownership and control over land, the support of numerically preponderant groups.

These are the two important sources of power in a village setting. One is ownership and control over land. We have discussed this in the previous class when we talked about dominant caste. Because dominance, the ability to dominate others emerge from the fact that you have the ownership of large tracts of land on which other people are dependent on their livelihood. In many occasions, one of the easiest way to punish an entire section of people was to deny them the opportunity to work or to tell that you are no longer employed in my land hereafter.

And that would put that, put those people into severe hardship because their only livelihood, source of their livelihood was to work in the land and then gets the meagre remuneration that they would get in the form of grains or maybe some other kinds. So, ownership of land is not only provide you with money and resources and wealth, but also it gives you a very important means to exert control over others and the support of numerically preponderant group. This is another important source of power, especially in a democratic setup where your political importance is based on the votes that you garner. However, many features of power structure cannot be seen in terms of hierarchical arrangements. There is a conflict between two political parties and others.

So, at the same time, many features of power structure cannot be seen in terms of hierarchical arrangements. So, this hierarchy is not very clear. And also, you will find that maybe two people belong to the same dominant group might belong to two different political parties. And the factionalism can be a major issue in that.

So, things are much more complicated. Caste, class and power and analysis. Class, unlike caste is open principle and practice. One may change one's position from the tenant to landowner from agricultural laborer to owner cultivator. So, Beteilie records this transition of people from agricultural laborer to owner cultivator, so that mobility is possible. In the past till the end of 19th century, the landowner as well as the agricultural laborer formed a more or less closed category as the only way of acquiring land was by inheritance.

Again, very, very important point that for a large part of human history of Indian history, ownership of land was based on inheritance. You, to a large extent, I am not saying completely, to a large extent, especially looking into the communities that are

traditionally seen as land owning caste and communities who are seen as landless communities. However, in the mid-20th century, by 1950s, the movement between different agriculture classes and Sripuram accelerated due to considerable buying and selling of land. This also is connected with the larger story of migration of people, migration of rural, migration of upper caste people, especially land-owning Brahmins from rural hinterlands into main cities, main cities of Trichy, of Chennai, of Madurai, where they began to embrace modern education and then get into modern occupations or modern jobs that are offered by the colonial government as well as the postcolonial government. So, that completely, to a large extent, changed the village structure.

In traditional society, there was much greater consistency between the class system and the caste structure. Class system was largely subsumed under caste structure. As we mentioned, the kind of a correspondence between these two structures of caste. However, the relationship between caste structure and class system is dynamic in modern society. The changes in the caste system due to westernization and Sanskritization and in the class system due to extension of cash economy, the emergence of new caste free occupations and the coming of land into the market have contributed to the dissociating class relations from the caste structure.

So, a series of factors, the emergence of cash economy, which brought in revolutionary changes and then emergence of new caste free occupations, a host of new entrepreneurship, host of new craft, new job opportunities, new industries, emerged, which were kind of caste free, which were not connected with the traditional understanding of caste and coming of land into the market. Land was transferred not only through inheritance, but land was available in the open market, because many of the upper caste people who wanted to move to the urban centers wanted to dispose of the caste, of the land. And the land was freely available in the market and to be bought by people who have money. So, in a, in the logic of a market, caste sentiments hardly matter. So, this land was given away or it was given to the highest bidder who had money.

And several castes by then in Sripura village had assumed, had made good fortunes by various other crafts and other business engagement and they were able to buy land from these people. Despite the overlap, one can still achieve a variety of class positions with different degrees of probability, whatever one's position in the caste structure may be, very important argument. There was a rapid change happening in the distribution of power in village system. Beteilie's very important argument about how this transition of power was happening. Unlike caste and class, power has shifted much more decisively from the traditional elites of the village into the hands of the new popular political leaders.



Traditionally, the village sarpanch or village chief or village head man always belong to a traditional, a couple of influential families of, obviously of upper caste. Now, that has moved away from a, you know, given closed limited set of families of caste into much more, into popular political leaders who can come from many other castes. And if the land-owning groups were the powerful families in the past, new basis of power has emerged, have emerged in modern society, which is independent of caste, class, size, the strength of numerical support. So, the numerical support can be garnered on the basis of various attributes.

Caste identity, caste affiliation is only one among them. And you will see, you know, political party, party ideologies becoming important, where party ideologies are able to garner support from across the caste groups, certain, for example, the International Congress or BJP for that matter or Communist Party for that matter, were able to appeal to a wide variety of caste positions on various permutations and combinations. So, the power, political power was, of course, is based on your popular support. This popular support is not directly a product of your caste affiliation. That is the argument.

Power is no longer a monopoly of any single caste in the village. The emergence of the panchayat system, parties and political network has constituted new locus of power distinct from the caste and class. It was largely due to the political modernization of India. A familiar story to us, but it is worth reiterating that the electoral democracy and the grassroot democracy that is established in India through Panchayati raj has revolutionized to a large extent and has altered the traditional power structure in the villages. The traditional village system was made up largely of systems of groups and categories whose boundaries were relatively clear and well-defined. However, the social change induced by various socioeconomic and political factors has blurred the contours of this traditional system and contributed to the emergence of a new system.

As I, as we mentioned, to a large extent, they were rather stable. The caste and class position were stable, but a host of process of modernity has kind of scrambled or at least disrupted this particular system to a large extent. Social mobility, economic change and political modernization in modern society have formed not only new economic and political relations, but also new values, attitudes, and aspirations. It goes without saying that new ideas and values and attitudes and aspirations with respect to say family relations, with respect to marriage, with respect to gender roles, with respect to religion, caste, everything. In the India rural world is witnessing a kind of a rapid transformation.

Change has become the fundamental feature of modern society. So, this is a kind of a summary of Beteilie's argument and mostly explicating his work on this Thanjavur

village, caste, class, and power. As I mentioned, it provides a very fascinating, very powerful view on a more comprehensive picture of the, of a village setting, whereby analyzing these three distinct features of caste, of a village, that is caste, class and power and also focusing on the rapid changes that are happening. Beteilie was able to provide a much more nuanced and fascinating picture of transformations that are happening in the rural areas. And these are the main references that are used for this essay for some of the important works. Ramesh Bairy, 'Being Brahmin, Being Modern', then Andre Beteilie, 'Caste, Class and Power', then Beteilie's own work, 'Society and Politics', then Daherendorf, Ralf Daherendorf, Class and Class Conflicting in the Society, Max Weber from Max Weber Essays in Sociology.

So, these are familiar references. So, I am winding up the class today and we will move to the next class, that is the structuralism and Louis Dumou from the next week. So, see you then. Thank you.