

Reproduction without Belief: Caste Endogamy, Network Function, and the Problem of Sincere Anti-caste Self-understanding

SACHIN BIJARNIA

M.A.

Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Caste has been explained as a system of ritual purity, as a means of extracting labour and wealth, and as institutions held in place by law and political competition. Each predicts that caste practices should weaken under the conditions India has seen since independence, and caste groups have indeed moved much closer together in education, occupation, income and access to public resources. Marriage has not followed. Matrimonial data indicate a strong preference for marrying within caste, yet families securing it give up very little on the other qualities they seek, so endogamy appears cheap to maintain rather than costly to defend. Three questions are separated here. How is the boundary kept in place? Network and institutional accounts answer that well. Why is the arrangement defended at every level rather than only at the top? Ambedkar's graded inequality answers it on its own. How can people who reject caste sincerely still reproduce it and feel no tension in doing so? Neither of the first two speaks to that. Žižek's ideological disavowal is offered as a possible answer to the third question only, with preference, norm compliance and disavowal kept apart throughout, and what would count against the reading is set out along with why no study now available could single it out.

Keywords: Caste, Endogamy, Social reproduction, Disavowal, Caste networks, Ambedkar

INTRODUCTION

Evidence on caste in India since independence points in a direction most theories of caste did not expect. The gaps have narrowed. Munshi's survey of the economic literature records caste groups moving closer together in education, occupation, income and access to public resources over the decades after 1947 (Munshi 2019). Materialist and institutional accounts both predict that outcome. On the aggregate figures, both look right. Marriage is the exception.

Marriage did not follow. Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak and Lafortune, studying people who had placed matrimonial advertisements, estimated how much they valued caste alongside education, income, appearance and family background, and found a strong preference for marrying within caste together with a result that is easy to miss: caste made little difference to how people

were matched on everything else (Banerjee *et al.*, 2013). The second finding is the one that matters. In the setting these data cover, families get endogamy cheaply. The gap needs explaining.

Three claims have to be kept apart even so. Low cost is a claim about revealed preference and equilibrium matching, supported for the population these data cover. That the boundary is therefore not felt as a constraint is a claim about experience, which advertisements cannot reach. That the absence of felt constraint amounts to disavowal rather than preference, habit or norm compliance is a third claim, and the strongest objection to what follows is that nothing here shows it. The distinction matters throughout. Materialist, institutional and network accounts alike predict decline, which is what makes persistence a puzzle: the same populations changed considerably in schooling, occupation and income over the period in which marriage across caste

lines barely moved (Vaid, 2014; Reddy, 2015).

Three questions have been run together in this literature, and separating them organises what follows. They sit at three levels: the institution, the hierarchy, the person. How is the boundary kept in place? Network and institutional accounts answer that well. Why is it defended by groups at every level rather than only at the top? Ambedkar's graded inequality answers that on its own. How can someone who rejects caste sincerely take part in reproducing it and feel no tension at all? Neither of the first two speaks to this. The third stands apart.

That third question needs three states kept apart which behavioural data make look alike. A preference is a want open to persuasion; a norm is a view about what is proper, held whether or not one's own preference agrees. Disavowal is neither: caste is indefensible and I reject it, said sincerely by someone whose practice reproduces caste, who knows what that practice is, and who feels no contradiction. What sets it apart is not that practice differs from belief, which is common. It is that the difference produces no friction at all. Moving down the three levels means moving down in confidence: the first rests on measured effects, the second on a structural argument, the third on interpretation. That ordering is deliberate.

What the received accounts explain, and where they stop

Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* remains the most systematic structural statement. Caste, on that account, is not one kind of stratification among others but a distinct principle of social organisation, in which the opposition between pure and impure contains power and wealth and ranks them below itself (Dumont, 1970). Critics have argued that it gives too much weight to how Brahmins described the system and too little to everyday relations of dominance. The objection predates Dumont. The criticism has force. Berreman had made it before *Homo Hierarchicus* appeared, arguing from comparative fieldwork that caste is better understood as institutionalised inequality of the kind found in racial hierarchies (Berreman, 1960, 1971).

Gupta complicates both positions, since caste on his reading is not experienced as one agreed hierarchy at all: each group holds its own version of the order, in which it stands higher than others would place it (Gupta, 2004). What survives from Dumont is the formal point that caste works through a principle rather than a set of

positions, because a system built on positions alone should have dissolved as the positions changed. They have changed considerably. Materialist accounts run into trouble where the figures show the gaps closing, and Teltumbde makes that point from inside the tradition, arguing that market expansion reorganised caste rather than dissolving it (Teltumbde, 2010).

Institutional accounts face a difficulty of their own, since institutions that recognise caste so as to remedy disadvantage also hold those categories in place (Munshi, 2019; Pande, 2003). What none of the three provides is a mechanism by which caste is reproduced by people who do not believe in it. The claim is not that Indians privately hold beliefs they publicly deny, nor that false consciousness stops them seeing how the system works, which the evidence contradicts. What needs explaining is that accurate description, sincere rejection and undiminished practice sit together in the same people, with no visible strain. That combination needs a mechanism.

The empirical record: convergence, persistence, and what moved

Judging any account of how caste reproduces itself means knowing what has actually changed. The narrowing of material gaps is real. Munshi's synthesis records movement in education, occupation, income and public resources (Munshi, 2019); Vaid's review of the sociological work reaches similar conclusions about occupational mobility while warning against treating caste as unchanging (Vaid, 2014); and Deshpande established the shape of caste disparity and its persistence even in relatively favourable settings such as Kerala (Deshpande, 2011). Convergence is nonetheless real.

Discrimination continues alongside that narrowing, which limits how far the optimistic reading can be pushed. Siddique's audit study and Attewell and Thorat's correspondence study both find identically qualified applicants treated differently (Siddique, 2011; Attewell and Thorat, 2010), and Singh and colleagues trace caste segregation in Indian cities over time (Singh *et al.*, 2019). Experimental work speaks to the mechanism more directly. Hoff and Pandey tested Indian schoolboys on tasks unrelated to caste, varying whether caste identity was announced beforehand, and found that announcing it changed how well low-caste boys performed (Hoff and Pandey, 2006, 2014). A social position can shape behaviour through the expectations attached to it, in

people who need not accept those expectations and may reject them outright. Belief is not required.

Institutional action has produced measurable effects in the other direction: Pande shows that reserved political representation increased policy influence for disadvantaged groups (Pande, 2003), and Trivedi documents Dalit accumulation that a story of pure reproduction would not predict (Trivedi, 2023). Jodhka insists that caste be treated as a changing, regionally varied formation rather than a single thing on one trajectory (Jodhka, 2015), a warning that limits every general claim made here. One feature of the record matters most for what follows. Gaps have closed where caste works through decisions that are costly to the individual, visible to institutions and actionable at law, and have not closed where it works through decisions that are none of these. Marriage sits at the far end of that range. It is barely actionable.

Purity as organising signifier, and what it cannot absorb

Purity works by relation rather than by measurable content: any position is pure compared with what lies below and impure compared with what lies above, so the word takes its content only from the differences it arranges. A term that works this way needs nothing to refer to, which is why discrediting the ritual doctrine that once filled it has left its organising work largely intact. Purity can never be reached, since it is always the position above wherever one stands, which is why sanskritisation changed observance considerably while changing relative standing much less (Srinivas, 1956). The scale also needs an anchor. Something must be absolutely impure.

That anchoring role falls to work involving bodily waste. Wankhede and Kahle trace how manual scavenging has survived both statutory prohibition and years of Supreme Court jurisprudence (Wankhede and Kahle, 2023). Two features resist economic explanation: the work needs no scarce skill and could be mechanised at affordable cost, yet mechanisation has been slower than the economics alone would predict; and the stigma attaches to people rather than to the work, outlasting departure from the occupation. Neither feature is economic. Ordinary social-reproduction accounts explain most of this and deserve credit before anything more speculative is brought in, since hereditary occupation, residential segregation, endogamous marriage and

inherited disadvantage together produce a stigma attached to descent rather than to activity (Singh *et al.*, 2019; Mendonca *et al.*, 2024; Mosse, 2018). That account is workable.

What follows is a speculative extension, marked as such because it is the most exposed material here. The Lacanian Real names the point where a symbolic order fails to make sense of something, and death, decay and bodily waste occupy that place in most symbolic systems. Caste's way of handling the remainder, on this reading, is to assign it to a category of people. That does not remove the difficulty. It moves it. What the extension adds beyond social reproduction is one expectation, and stating it is the only thing that stops the vocabulary being decorative: the position should be filled again rather than left empty, so that when one group leaves, the treatment moves to whoever takes over the work. Ziyauddin's ethnography of the Hadi caste in Bokaro finds the association with sanitation work travelling with an occupational group across two centuries and a move into an industrial township (Ziyauddin, 2022). That evidence is descriptive rather than causal. If stigma fades as the work is mechanised, instead of following the work, the extension fails. The test is straightforward.

Graded inequality and the division of the subject

Ambedkar's statement of the problem in *Annihilation of Caste* draws its sharpness from a structural observation rather than a moral one. Caste, on his account, is not a division of labour but a division of labourers, ordered by a rising scale of respect and a falling scale of contempt in which every group has some group below it (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936]). He drew the political conclusion himself. A system arranged this way cannot be opposed by a united front of the subordinated, since each group's resentment of those above is held in check by what it has invested in staying above those below. Resentment runs downward too.

The mechanism is a system of rewards, and its efficiency lies in how cheap those rewards are to supply. What a middle group gets is rarely a material advantage large enough to survive examination. It gets a position: the assurance of not being at the bottom. That kind of standing never runs out, unlike money or land, because giving it to one group costs nothing beyond keeping the group below in place. Graded inequality buys its coalition almost for free. Standing costs nothing to grant.

Ambedkar's argument is complete at this point, and

treating it as a forerunner waiting for psychoanalysis would misdescribe both what it does and what it was for. One question opens here even so, and it is the hinge between the hierarchy and the person. His mechanism explains why a position is worth defending while it pays. What happens to the attachment when the payment becomes doubtful, and people go on defending a standing whose material content an observer can no longer find? A theory of interests has to predict that the attachment fades. The record does not clearly show it fading. That silence is the opening.

Lacanian vocabulary is brought in for that question and no other. On that account the subject is divided by entering a symbolic order that was already there: one takes up a position at the cost of never quite being identical with it, and the gap that remains is held to feed the attachment rather than weaken it (Lacan, 2006; Fink, 1995; Copjec, 1994; McGowan, 2016). The chain proposed is short. A graded structure hands out positions worth holding, holding one produces attachment, that attachment keeps up the boundary through which position passes to the next generation, and the attachment may outlast the advantage that made it worth having. Only the last link needs psychoanalysis, and a reader who breaks the chain there keeps everything before it. Nothing in that link can be measured independently, and a functional rival explains the same behaviour as an investment in network membership. Section 7 examines it.

Disavowal and the reproduction of practice

Žižek's reworking of ideology critique turns the classical account around in a way that bears on the marriage evidence. The classical view held that people misrecognise what they are really doing: they do not know. Žižek reverses this: they know very well what they are doing, and do it anyway, placing ideology in the practice rather than in the belief that goes with it (Žižek, 1989). Cynical distance is the working term. Someone who carries out a practice while making clear he is not taken in by it experiences that distance as freedom from what the practice means, and it does the opposite: distance protects the practice by removing the belief that would otherwise leave it open to argument. Argument then finds no purchase.

Applied to the marriage evidence, this offers one possible reading, and what follows from low cost is a conditional rather than a finding. A practice demanding

real sacrifice would be experienced as a commitment, defended when challenged, and would produce visible conflict inside families who weigh that sacrifice differently. A practice that is cheap in its setting would produce none of this, and would sit comfortably alongside sincere rejection of caste. Sitting comfortably alongside something is weaker than evidence for it. The matrimonial data record revealed preference; they say nothing about what anyone felt. Experience is not measured.

One limitation of that evidence is serious enough to qualify the whole argument. The data are produced at the level of the family placing the advertisement, and low cost measured there is not low cost paid by everyone the decision affects. For those who might cross the boundary, and disproportionately for women, the costs are neither low nor psychological: broken family ties, withdrawal of financial support, surveillance, forced marriage and violence (Chakravarti, 2018; Still, 2014; Gautam, 2025). How often each follows is not something this literature can settle, since it is qualitative throughout. Coercion is a live alternative, and it is not disavowal. The data cannot separate them.

The same structure is observable where selection is delegated. Titzmann's study of Indian matrimonial websites shows caste retained as a standard category of the search interface (Titzmann, 2013), which renders as a setting, applied before any candidate appears, what kin networks had kept unspoken and negotiable at the edges. Nobody then experiences himself as excluding anyone. Describing oneself as meritocratic works the same way at work: firms whose callback patterns differ by caste describe their procedures as caste-blind (Attewell and Thorat, 2010), and those descriptions are not simply false, since no explicit rule produces the difference (Samraj, 2022). Under open hierarchy, exclusion was stated and therefore arguable; under caste-blindness it is not stated and offers nothing to argue against.

Two cautions follow. A change in form is not a change in the underlying distribution, and formal equality won real gains. Statistical discrimination would also produce different callback rates with no disavowal involved (Munshi, 2019).

The network account, and the division of labour between explanations

The network account is the best-developed

explanation of caste's persistence that needs no psychic economy at all, and nothing here tries to displace it. It answers the first of the three questions set out above better than any alternative on offer, including this one. Munshi documents caste networks doing jobs that formal institutions in India do badly: extending credit where there is no collateral, supplying referrals where hiring is informal, spreading risk where insurance markets are thin, and enforcing obligations through reputation inside a closed group (Munshi, 2019). Endogamy on this reading is not an unconscious investment. It is what keeps the boundary intact so that enforcement works, since a network cannot discipline people who can leave through marriage. The boundary does real work.

The foundations are well documented. Munshi and Rosenzweig show caste networks shaping schooling choices with measurable returns that lasted into a globalising economy (Munshi and Rosenzweig, 2006), and Mosse treats caste as reorganised by market expansion rather than dissolved by it (Mosse, 2018). The predictions are also specific enough to test: if endogamy is a tool of network membership, its strength should vary with what the network is worth, weakening where formal credit, insurance and labour-market institutions are strong. That is a genuine prediction, and so far an untested one (Ray *et al.*, 2020). Nobody has looked.

Three observations complicate the account without overturning it. None is decisive. Gaps have narrowed in education, occupation and income while endogamy has not weakened to the same degree, though that comparison assumes network value falls as formal institutions improve, at a rate the evidence does not document. Endogamy is maintained without material sacrifice (Banerjee *et al.*, 2013), which fits a boundary that is cheap because everyone keeps it as well as it fits an instrument being defended. And differential callbacks persist in urban private-sector hiring, where the network's insurance functions have least to do with the transaction (Attewell and Thorat, 2010).

What follows is a division of labour rather than a verdict. The network account explains what the boundary does and why keeping it pays, and it need not address how keeping it feels to someone who holds no caste belief. Treating the two as rivals mistakes answers to different questions for competing answers to one. The division has a consequence the argument has to accept: if the network account fully explains why the boundary survives, the psychoanalytic reading does no explanatory

work on the persistence of endogamy at all, and its subject is narrower: what it is like to take part in a practice one disowns. The samples limit all of this, since the marriage evidence comes from advertisements placed by urban, literate, mostly middle-class families in one period.

What would count against the account, and what simpler concepts cannot do

A framework that fits every possible relation between what people say and what they do explains nothing. The disavowal account faces that charge unless it says what would defeat it. Four observations would weaken it. First, evidence that families report weighing endogamy and giving something up for it, at rates comparable to how they weigh income or education, would undercut the claim about experience directly. Second, evidence that endogamy weakens as the network's value falls, where caste belief has not changed, would show the boundary tracking function alone. Third, evidence that those who reject caste most strongly also marry across it most often would close the gap between word and practice on which the account rests. Fourth, if the coordination effect described in section 7 fully explains why conformity is cheap, appealing to unconscious investment adds nothing.

The third is the sharpest, because existing instruments can measure it. Attitude surveys and marriage records already exist for overlapping populations, and nobody has examined the link between them with this question in mind. The stake is plain. If stated anti-caste attitude turns out to predict inter-caste marriage strongly, the argument made here is substantially wrong. The stake is plain.

Being open to defeat is not the same as being singled out: all four observations could fail to appear and disavowal could still be the wrong description, since preference, norm compliance, coordination, coercion and habit would survive the same tests. What would distinguish it is narrower evidence about how people justify themselves. Someone acting on a preference gives reasons when asked; someone following a norm points to the norm, or to the disapproval that would follow from breaking it; someone in the condition described here does neither, and reports instead that the question never came up. Even that would make the reading more plausible rather than settle it. Nothing available settles it.

A reader is entitled to ask why status, habit,

socialisation, assortative preference or norm will not do the job. For most of what is examined here, they will, and reaching for psychoanalysis where they suffice would be the retrofitting the framework stands accused of. The charge would be fair. What they fit least well is narrower than the persistence of endogamy: a sincerely held anti-caste position sitting in the same person, without visible strain, alongside a practice that reproduces caste. Habit breaks under contrary conviction and this one does not; socialisation cannot be it, since the belief has been revised while the practice has not; and assortative preference cannot, since the trait being sorted on is the one the person denies caring about. What stands out is not that practice differs from belief. It is that the difference produces no felt tension, and it is that missing tension which disavowal is brought in to name. Whether it succeeds is open.

Violence, comparison, and the costs that fall unevenly

Violence against subordinated caste groups follows a pattern that accounts of caste as extraction explain poorly. Were it mainly a tool for keeping labour in line or holding on to land, it should rise and fall with the intensity of extraction. Teltumbde argues for closer to the opposite: atrocities have gone together with Dalit assertion, mobility and the claiming of formal rights rather than with quiet subordination (Teltumbde, 2010). Graded inequality begins to explain this with no psychoanalytic vocabulary at all. Where a middle group's reward is relative standing, the rise of the group below is a direct loss to it, not of resources but of the distance that was the reward. No transfer repairs that.

The forms such violence takes have been read as needing more than positional analysis, and that reading should be treated sceptically. Attacks aimed at consumption and display rather than at productive assets are also the cheapest and least risky to mount, and Žižek's fantasy of stolen enjoyment would explain only a residue the evidence does not yet show to exist (Žižek, 2009). This section accordingly claims less than the rest.

Two settings work by subtraction. The diaspora removes local enforcement, and the boundary still travels (Mehta, 2021). Comparison across religious traditions removes Hindu ritual doctrine, and turns out not to remove doctrine as such, since Haneefa's examination of *kafa'a* among the Muslims of Malabar finds another textual apparatus lending warrant to treating certain kinds of work as low (Haneefa, 2026). What such comparison

isolates is not a practice standing without justification, but one whose justification is replaceable. The result is weaker.

Gender is not an application of this argument. It is a condition of it. Chakravarti places the control of women's sexuality at the centre of caste reproduction, since endogamy is enforced mainly through restrictions on women (Chakravarti, 2018). Paik's and Still both show marriage to be where caste and gender are enforced together (Paik, 2014; Still, 2014), while Guru's argument that Dalit women speak differently refuses to treat their position as two disadvantages added up (Guru, 2019). Marriage is the site where the boundary is actually held, and the costs of holding it fall unevenly on the people it governs (Gautam, 2025). Those costs are conscious.

The 1956 conversion as withdrawal of recognition

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in October 1956 is usually read either as a religious decision or as a symbolic protest. Neither reading captures what makes it structurally different from reform. His own account of the reasoning, set out most fully in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, presents the move as a deliberate exit from a symbolic order rather than a swap of one set of doctrines for another (Ambedkar, 1957). If caste reproduces through practice held up by disavowal, argument aimed at beliefs will not reach it. Legal prohibition reaches the practice more effectively, though only where it can be enforced, which is why untouchability could be abolished in 1950 while endogamy carried on untouched. What conversion does that neither of these does is withdraw the recognition the whole structure rests on: it refuses the position, not the treatment, and a rising scale of respect has no hold on a person who has declined to be ranked. Rao reads the act in those terms (Rao, 2009), while Samuels shows Buddhist traditions themselves accommodating caste in some settings (Samuels, 2007).

Three limits need stating. Conversion did not end material disadvantage, and in some respects complicated converts' legal claim to reservation. It did not dissolve caste identification in practice, since converted communities went on being treated in caste terms by others. And Ambedkar's own practice was largely reformist, since he drafted a constitution, litigated, legislated and negotiated, which is why Ramesh's account of his position on democracy and state action corrects readings that treat him as having given up on institutional politics (Ramesh, 2022). The more

defensible reading is that he pursued both, legislation reaching enforceable practice while withdrawing recognition addresses the structure of positions legislation leaves standing.

Conclusion

The claims that survive the qualifications made along the way are of two kinds, and keeping them apart is the main methodological commitment made here. The empirical claims rest on evidence. Caste groups have moved much closer together in education, occupation, income and public resources, while marriage has not followed, and the matrimonial data show strong in-caste preference alongside little sacrifice on other qualities sought. Network and institutional accounts explain why the boundary holds, and Ambedkar's graded inequality explains why the arrangement is defended at every level rather than only at the top. Both claims rest on evidence.

The interpretive claim is offered with less confidence, and aimed at something narrower. Žižekian disavowal is put forward as one possible account of how caste-reproducing practice can sit alongside sincere anti-caste self-understanding without felt tension. Behaviour does not demonstrate it, since a functional account predicts the same behaviour; it is not needed to explain why endogamy persists; and the observations in section 8 would weaken it. A reader who is unconvinced can accept the previous paragraph in full. There is no inconsistency. How much network function, norm and psychic investment each contribute remains open, and the useful question is how they interact rather than which wins.

A practical distinction follows, and it may be the most useful thing the analysis produces. Anti-caste work divides broadly into efforts aimed at what people believe and efforts aimed at what they do, and the two are usually treated as pulling in the same direction. If the analysis here is even partly right, they do not: a practice held in place by network function, coordination or unavowed attachment is insulated from the first kind by design. Belief-directed work is not thereby pointless, since it changes public argument. Practice-directed work carries costs of its own: material support for inter-caste couples exposes them to the violence described in section 9. That leaves mechanising hereditary sanitation work the least ideologically demanding option available and among the least attempted (Wankhede and Kahle, 2023). No recommendation is free.

Ambedkar asked whether caste could be annihilated rather than reformed. Ninety years on, a great deal has been reformed while the practice through which caste reproduces itself has not. A great many people in India hold anti-caste convictions that are entirely sincere, reproduce caste in the one area where it matters most, and feel no tension between the two. That is not hypocrisy, which is felt as strain and defended when challenged, nor ignorance, since the practice is plainly visible to those carrying it out. It may be no more than preference dressed in progressive language, or a norm so deeply absorbed that it no longer looks like one, and if so the apparatus assembled here is unnecessary and should be dropped. But if it is none of those, then something is at work that the available sociology has no name for, and criticism aimed at what people believe about caste will go on missing it, by design.

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