

EPITOME OF PURITY AND POWER

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to explore how purity works in the village and power plays a significant role in the caste context. It describes the hierarchical relationship among different caste groups. It argues the undercurrent caste features and the positioning of the community in the caste system becomes the deciding factor of purity and power. Inequalities that arose from the caste system as society evolved have influenced the location of “power” in the current structure of Indian society. Further it argues how power influences the actions, beliefs or conduct of children. It legitimates political and religious control by socially dominant caste groups. It discusses the struggle of socially backward communities to get power by breaking the caste hierarchy. This article concludes by discussing Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and its relation with caste groups. This study has been conducted in the village of Konkan region of Maharashtra. The qualitative interview method has been carried out to understand the epitome of purity and power. The in-depth semi structured interview and participant observation have been employed as tools for data collection.

Key words: Power, Purity, Caste Hierarchy, Dominance



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INTRODUCTION

India has strongly entrenched power hierarchies that have historical roots but have also been exacerbated by inequalities and injustices that have deepened with caste. The central theme of this article is about ‘power’. This article is an endeavor to explore how ‘power’ could affect the dynamic of caste and relationships between villagers and among children. To understand the power relation in the village, this article employed the critical, cultural research approach. Bourdieu (1991) conception of capital together with Berger’s (Cited in Ihlen 2005) dimension of power relations were used to frame this article. The findings in this study suggest that power does affect the dynamics of caste and relationship between villagers. The implications of this article is that it managed to map the dimension of power relations based on the higher position possessed in caste hierarchy by the caste groups. In terms of theoretical implication the finding of this study has enhanced the conception of caste and the findings also link to the conception of Bourdieu’s cultural capital. From the caste study perspective, taking the roles of power between caste groups, this article suggests that the higher position a caste group possesses, the higher the power they have in social, political and economic life.

Bourdieu proposes sociology of symbolic power that addresses the important topic of relations between culture, social structure and action. He advances the bold claim that all cultural symbols and practices, from artistic tastes, style in dress, and eating habits to religion, science and philosophy even language itself-embody interests and function to enhance social distinctions. The focus of his work, therefore, is on how cultural socialization places individuals and groups within competitive status hierarchies, how relatively autonomous fields of conflict interlock individuals and groups in struggle over valued resources (Bourdieu 1986). Yet considering the history of the caste system and its contemporary manifestation, the substitutability of class for caste as if they are synonymous seems injudicious. As Dumont (1970) has pointed out in his seminal work *Homo Hierarhicus*, the caste hierarchy does not depend on material power but rather on status. Within the caste system the place occupied by an individual in the social hierarchy (social status) is largely divorced from her or his economic situation. (Cited in Dommaraju et al. 2008).

This article aims to fill the contextual gaps of power relations based on social status and children imbibing caste values in village settings. Understanding of children imbibing caste from a social science perspective, particularly in sociology of childhood discipline in the context of village was underdeveloped. This is due to the current focus of understanding children imbibing caste from the developmental psychology perspective. Therefore this article is trying to break the ground to provide the platform for understanding children's engagement with caste in villages from the sociology of childhood perspective. Curtin and Gaither (2005) have also suggested that power should be taken as the focal elements in developing a new theory of public relations. In caste studies literature, particularly in the relationship between the caste groups in villages; the question of power also forms as the central theme of investigation.

This article discusses Bourdieu's cultural capital and the position possessed by different caste groups living in the study village. Settlement in this village is based on caste. There are hamlets based on Maratha, Kunabi, Gurav, Nhavi, Vani, Ghorapi, Muslims and Buddhist form large populations and Katkari, Sutar, Sonar, Gosavi, Charmakar form the small population. Maratha and Vani own land at large and then Kunabi and other caste groups own less than them. Katkari are landless in this village since they are migrants there. The dynamics of power and authority are examined against the background of the historically changing relationship between caste

hierarchy, land, power and people. While discussing power relationships, the social status is being given prime importance to understand caste domination.

UNDERCURRENT CASTE FEATURES OF A VILLAGE

In a study village the difference between the lower caste communities and the dominant Vani caste was quite evident from their separate habitations, situated not far from one another, but distinct in the shape and condition of the houses of their respective caste-based hamlets. A hamlet belonging to Vani caste was richer than those around it and most of them were involved in Business. Entering into a hamlet of caste Vani, one observed the Flower Mill and a big ration shop which was a ration provider for all the villagers and great source for household for their daily kitchen stuff. The courtyard of another house, one could observe a Backhoe Loader which was commonly known as JCB and a dumper standing. There was a small Post Office which also worked as a light bill paying centre for most of the villagers. Children from Vani caste were seen well dressed all the time which made them look different from the other children from other hamlets. Power relation also led to cultural change in which the role of caste plays a vital role. This has further justified the reason to investigate children's relations in the context of imbibing caste values. Vani used to be *Khot*¹ in this village, meaning land owning caste and whoever had excess land they got Shetye as surname. According to Srinivas (2002 as cited in Jaspal 2011), a caste group may be regarded as 'dominant' when it 'wields economic and political power', constitutes a demographic majority, and when it enjoys a 'high' position within the social hierarchy (Jaspal 2011).

The President of the village temple trust was also belonging to Vani caste. Therefore, he was at the helm of the village affairs and dominated all the village festivals. The upper caste Hindus specifically in this village, called the *Mankari*² (the 'respectable/honourable people'), 'were accorded recognition as superior in social status' to the mass of people where the palanquin during Shimaga festival was to be kept first at the house of a person belonging to Vani caste and then it moved to other hamlets. Hence the dominance over religious shrines and festivals were there by caste Vani.

The larger issue, then, is one of power relations among individuals, groups, and institutions, indeed, for power is not a separate domain of study but stands at the heart of all social life. And the successful exercise of power requires legitimation (Bourdieu 1986). Here in India the caste

¹ *Khot* is a term used to refer land owning caste and whoever had excess of land

² *Mankari* a term denotes to honourable person from upper caste who is respected in most of the religious festivals at villages

system is legitimated by caste councils or caste panchayat, religion and social status. As caste Vani has been considered as *Manakari* or an honourable caste, the members of these castes have been legitimated to control over economic and political resources. Edwards (2006) has suggested that 'more productive view of power requires an understanding of the context in which public relations operates; that is, as a socially embedded profession'. People from Katkari tribe shared that they would have to cast their votes to the upper caste since houses of these communities were on the land of Vani caste people. Hence the dominance over politics was seen among Vani caste. All these factors hamper the bargaining power of the lower caste people and increase their dependence on the Vani caste. In the study village, these factors were evident, though in different degrees, pointing to the fact that the caste-wise division of people had been the main persisting in the village. Self-efficacy refers to feelings of competence and control over one's life and future (Breakwell, 1992 as cited in Jaspal 2011). Indeed, members of upper caste may perceive greater control over their lives and social environment due to their privileged position within the social hierarchy (Jaspal 2011). As the Vani caste had privileged positions at social, economic and political spheres they controlled all the resources in these spheres.

People from Vani caste held significant posts at political parties and Trade Unions and through that offered different services and support to the people. In return they expect people to support them during elections. Moreover, there was a tendency to exhibit respect through specific forms of body positioning and through discernible physical distance from members of upper castes. So called lower caste members were refrained from entering into social, political and economic spaces by the dominance of upper castes. It is reasonable to assume the lower castes' observance of these norms will benefit distinctiveness and self-esteem among the upper castes, since they implicitly symbolise their relatively higher social status vis-à-vis the lower castes. Given the pervasiveness of such patterns of behavioural interaction across time, it is likely that the lower castes' uncritical reproduction of these patterns constitutes a means of safeguarding the continuity principle of their identity (Breakwell, 1986 as cited in Jaspal 2011). Therefore, as articulated by Jaspal (2011) the human beings tend to regard themselves as fair and unprejudiced which was observed among the leaders from caste Vani.

Vani caste people claimed that their community was selfless and always offered support to others. But all the time wanted to hold a Sarpanch post at Grampanchayat by spending a lot of money on an election. Question arises here is that if they did not want any support from

Grampanchayat and if they would think about others then why would they want to be Sarpanch all the time by spending a lot of money? Narratives of Vani caste people were contradictory to the narratives of other villagers. They wanted to keep power in their hands and not let other caste people have control over Grampanchayat and Temple. It was observed that an upper caste people in the study village were reluctant to visit Dalit and tribal hamlets and generally did not accept food in lower caste houses. Upper caste children rarely had friends within the Dalit and Tribal communities. The friend circles in the village were constituted largely on the basis of caste groups. During festivals even though on the surface all seems well, there exists a strong undercurrent of caste feeling. Whereas other caste people look down upon the tribes terming them *Katkari* in a derogatory sense and undermine them as lazy and worthless. In particular, mingling of so-called upper caste people with Dalits and Tribals seemed quite unusual there. The present generation of children from Vani caste were mostly enrolled in the well known private school at Chiplun town whereas children from OBC castes, Dalits and *Katkari* communities were mostly enrolled in village primary schools, (Attendance of *Katkari* children was intermittent), but still progress in education seems abysmally low. The stark disparity was revealed between children from Vani caste and the children from rest of the village distinct by their attire and appearance and by the vocabulary of their language they speak.

EXPLOITATION BY UPPER CASTE

Jaspal (2011) rightly pointed out that there is inter-dependence of the variables such as social status, institutional control and superiority, all of which are implicated in the aforementioned concept of 'dominant castes'. Even Vani caste people dominated the government institutions by providing space to build them up. The land on which the Grampanchayat office, Talathi office and Post office were constructed was owned by Vani caste. This shows that resources villages were controlled by caste Vani. Hence they dominate over economic resources in this village.

A man belonging to Kunabi caste reminisced about the past when the dominant Vani caste enjoyed social and political power and the lower caste submitted to their dominance without questioning them. He narrated that the village temple was closed for eighteen years due to pernicious behaviour of Vani caste people and then they thought that due to their noxious behaviour they were cursed by god and to get rid-of it they performed a ritual named '*devaski*³' meaning spending a lot of money for the village and offering gold to god. So for eighteen years

³ *Devaski* is the ritual performed by people to make god happy by offering a lot of money and gold to god.
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the celebration of *Shimaga* was stopped. But then caste Vani people brought all villagers together and performed *Kalya-lavane*⁴ ritual and could succeed in restarting Shimaga again. A Kunabi man showed aggravation towards caste Vani that despite all their mischievous acts, they still controlled the President post of Kanhoba Temple Trust due to economic power. He shared all the strategies of caste Vani people to control religious power such as lending thousands of money for renovating a village temple. Then villagers were in debt of paying that money back and till they repay that money, villagers do not oppose Vani caste people in any decision making process. Another resentment he expressed was that caste Vani people organised tours to religious places for the villagers without taking any money and hence those who went they became slaves of him. He felt that Vani caste people played a clever game by supporting other caste people financially when they were in need and then they put them under debt.

An aged Buddhist man narrated that during festivals Kunabi caste people get a secondary position. He described during Shimaga Kunabi caste people used to carry palanquin in all over the village but later on Kunabi people started opposing it and stopped carrying palanquin all over the village. The Kunabi youth decided to break this hegemony and confronted this dominance by caste Vani. But on the other hand the self-efficacy of lower caste members could be threatened by the potential feelings of disenfranchisement from a social institution to which they too lay claim, namely religion (Jaspal 2011). Hence this is the widespread disenfranchisement of Kunabi caste all over Konkan region of Maharashtra.

A Maratha caste person blamed Vani caste people for being incendiary and creating disputes among people. Even creating fear among people in the name of god would keep people under their control. Then supporting villagers materialistically made people support Vani caste blindly. A Gurav man kept questioning the dominance of Vani caste over oppression of Bahun community by them. The dominance such as controlling Temple trust for long being President on it, holding Chairman post of high school and being Sarpanch for several times made him think about oppression of OBC communities. Caste Nhavi also expressed that due to dominance of Vani caste over Gurav caste who were large in number, they could not get power in their hands. Shah (1991) rightly articulated that the exploitative caste system is backed

⁴ Kalya-lavane is the superstitious belief which is generally seen among people from Konkan region of Maharashtra. Process is like inserting two flowers in the water and then putting on the two sides of stone of god (*pashan*) i.e. on the right side one for 'Yes' and the left side one for 'No'. These flowers get stuck on the stone due to water and when one of these flowers would fall down then they decide whether god is agree or not
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by legal, religious and cultural sanctions which enable the ruling classes and castes to perpetuate their dominance and maintain the *status quo* in their favour.

The position of the Maratha was always disputed by the Vani and in this village where Vani are powerful, Maratha have taken a lower position. But whatever the position and rivalries of the castes of the varnas, the position of all the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Katkaris have been held to be lower than the position of all the Vanis and Marathas. The Jajmani system was mainly seen in the village system of India based on an economic system in which lower castes serve upper caste in different ways and received grains in return. A man who was popularly known as *Gurav*⁵ performed the role of caretaker of the village temple and god. For his service, in return used to get rewards in the form of grains or money. The Gurav's perpetual association with the temples defines their status and thereby legitimises their position below caste Vani and socio-economic exclusion.

Shah (1991) argues that social structure places certain communities in a particular disadvantageous position by delimiting their life chances. Traditionally as caste Vani have been placed above all OBC castes, OBC castes have been positioned at disadvantageous situations where their social, political and economic opportunities got delimited. As the system has continued with religious sanction for centuries it has become a cultural system in which members of upper and lower castes have internalised caste ideology. Breaking down the caste hierarchy occurs when people become conscious of their oppression and they challenge the caste hierarchy.

DISPUTE OVER SOCIO-POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS POWER

Class cannot be the exclusive axis in understanding power in Indian society. A caste-ridden rural society with different hamlets needs better characterisation. This section focuses on the disputes between Maratha from Ingawalewadi and Vani from Shetyewadi. The village had been divided into two groups that are *Char-ane*⁶ and *Bar-ane*⁷. Maratha caste people with Ingawale as surname lived in one-fourth of the village with less population of Ghorapi caste and Gosavi caste. Three-fourth of the village consisted of people from different caste backgrounds. There was a history behind dividing this village into two different parts which led to the evolution of cultural and political domination in this village, against which the temple struggle was fought.

⁵ Gurav is popularly known as a caretaker of village temples belonging to the Gurav caste. He does small rituals at temples like offering coconut to god and giving a holy ash to the people visiting with some problems.

⁶ *Char-ane* means the one-fourth part of the village.

⁷ *Bar-ane* means the three-fourth part of the village.

The narratives of other villagers claimed that Maratha and Kunabi were original inhabitants of this village and Vani were considered as guests who came later and settled in this village. Traditionally Vani were traders and economically well off hence they used to lend money to Maratha people and in return got their land. That is how they owned most of the land in this village. But to claim superiority over others there was a dispute between Maratha and Vani on the original inhabitants of this village. An attempt to claim superiority was to control the village god and its temple since if a particular caste had control over a village temple they would control the whole village keeping religious power in their hands.

People from Katkari community had houses on the land owned by Vani caste. The houses were scattered all over the hill in this village hence the land on the hill was occupied by Katkari. The Vani caste wanted Katkari people to vacate the whole hill just because the land was owned by Vani and the land price had gone up in this village. But since Katkari people have been living on this hill from generations to generations so Katkari could not be vacated from this place. So Vani people had given them some extra land and requested them to build their houses at one side of the hill so that Vani people can use remaining land on the hill. These all narratives show the dominance of caste Vani over other caste people to keep control over them socially, politically and economically.

In the study village Vani caste people were successful in dividing Kunabi caste people into two groups for dividing votes and could win a majority in Grampanchayat election for two consecutive years. In its political dimension caste constitutes systems of dominance and rule at local and regional levels (Mosse 2018). So other marginalised groups always had this feeling of alienation among them. The more the village society is imbued with politics, the more the conflicts between the haves and the have-nots are increasing (Roy, 2012). When a nine-year-old boy from Kunabi caste was asked which hamlet he visited for marriage and he took Bagwadi's name where Maratha caste people lived. Immediately his elder sister questioned him whether Baagwadi was part of their group. Such village disputes are deeply rooted among children. It was observed that children from these two groups played together, hanged around together. An eleven-year-old girl from Kunabi caste believed that two Kunabi groups should become one. Children do not want two disputed groups at their own hamlet. We can infer that caste binds children together.

A person from Vani caste claimed that they had different ways of keeping power in their hands; hence they manipulated the election process and held Sarpanch post with them. He further

claimed that Vani caste only played games or used strategies to keep power in their hands. For their political achievements, he appreciated Vani caste people and praised them as great politicians of this village. By every example of caste Vani it was proved that they felt proud of being Vani and expressed their happiness for controlling most of the important political positions in the Chiplun block. Another strategy of getting votes from people is to give one superior post of different Gram Panchayat committees to the person who is active in a particular hamlet. So giving a post to an important person at a particular hamlet and giving money for building temples play an important role in getting votes from that particular hamlet. So Vani caste people played a cunning role in politics by buying votes from lower caste people. Since Vani caste people were economically rich they could distribute money during election period and could buy votes from villagers and therefore dominated the village politically.

Factors responsible for determining political backwardness depends on the social structure. Backward communities struggle to get power in their hands but they face social barriers and economic barriers to get so. According to Dalvatne Grampanchayat data, the caste Gurav and Kunabi constituted the largest part of the village and caste Vani, Muslims and Katkari constituted the smallest part of the village. The Gurav and Kunabi were considered as backward classes. So in-spite of these two hamlets of caste Gurav and Kunabi having larger populations in general and large numbers of votes in specific, backward communities in the village would have dominated the Village Grampanchayat. But caste Vani who had only twelve households dominated the village socially, economically and politically.

CONCLUSION

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class (Bourdieu 1986). Taking skills as Symbolic capital and relating it to the Vani caste then one can observe that most of the Vani caste people were skillful in being into business. By the posture of dominant and subordinate caste, like when they sit, when they stand and when they walk, one could at least guess which caste they come from. Clothing of the people and children also symbolises the caste of people. As clothing on the caste Vani children were completely different from the clothing on the children from Kunabi caste and it applied to other castes as well according to their hierarchy into social order. Such forms of cultural capital create a sense of collective identity and group position. Caste still seems to be a major dynamic reason in rural areas by which everyday

politics revolves. It appears from this qualitative study that institutional or formal decentralization of power could not eliminate caste-based hierarchy from the social and cultural body of society if not accompanied by the upward mobility of the backward communities and a social-political movement to fulfill the objective.

This article manages to prove that power does affect the dynamic of communication and relationship between actors involved. It was observed that there was a difference in communication and relationship between caste Vani and other castes. It manages to map the dimension of relationship between actors based on the capital they possessed. This possessed capital to shape the behavior of children in terms of the caste group they belong to. The finding of the study also managed to enhance the conception of cultural capitals by Bourdieu. The findings show that the social and cultural power are the major factors that caused the shifting balance of power in the Dalvatne village. Culture provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction; it is also a source of domination. Culture includes beliefs, traditions, values, and language; it also mediates practices by connecting individuals and groups to institutionalized hierarchies. Whether in the form of dispositions, objects, systems, or institutions, culture embodies power relations (Bourdieu 1986).

The location of “power” in the current structure of Indian society has been influenced by inequalities that emerged from the caste system as society evolved. A significant determinant of the stability and efficacy of any kind of power relationship is the internalisation of its logic. The Indian caste system is probably the most successful illustration of that societal order, rooted in an intangible yet powerful notion of ‘purity’ of a person and even a group. In fact, people derive their relative purity from what the scriptures ascribe to a caste to which they belong. The priest is the epitome of purity while the “untouchable” occupies the bottom of the pile as the caretaker of corpses and scavengers of excreta. An upper caste community controls all the resources and dominates social, political and economic spaces in this village.

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