

## Castes in India: Are They Evolving?

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In India, the convention has been that Hindus should participate in a religiously pre-defined occupation. Earlier studies have found evidence that while the Vaisyas caste dominated business, Brahmins maintained their traditional occupation as priests. The current study explores small business occupations in Udipi, a city in southern India. Our findings indicate a surge of Brahmins in business activities, indicating a move away from their traditional occupation. For their part, members of the Vaisyas caste continue their traditionally defined caste-based small business occupations. The study, limited in the generalizations it can justify because it is based on sampling in only a small portion of India, is reported here for the fascinating detail it conveys about a subject that is of sacred importance in India.

**Keywords:** India's caste system, Hindu religion, India, possible evolution of the caste system.

Caste, a sociological construct, has been known to exist for 3000 years in India. Ancient Hindu society segregated population into four (later five) castes, which have been mutually exclusive, hereditary, exhaustive, endogamous, and occupation-specific. These were the Brahmins (priests, teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors, royalty), Vaisyas (moneylenders, traders), the Sudras (menial jobs) and the Ati Sudras (the untouchables, doing the lowest of the menial jobs).

Caste affiliation dictated all aspects of a person's existence. The Varna (i.e., caste) hierarchy was relatively straightforward, with the first three tiers considered superior to the last two. In modern India, some scholars argue that the relationship between caste and occupation is becoming flexible (Beteille 2012; Srinivas 2002, p.39-40; Vaid 2014).

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On the contrary, some argue that the older system continues to be rigid and is here to stay (Desai 1971; Kumar et al. 2002; Srinivas 2002, p.39; Beteille 2012). As noted by Desai, “agriculture labourers remain largely agricultural labourers, or carpenters become carpenters in a factory or weavers become weavers in textile mills” (1971 p.1095). Even in early 21st century villages and small cities, caste-based occupations appeared inflexible (Carlsson et al. 2009).

Notwithstanding some change, occupations remain mostly caste driven (Olcott 1944), including in small business. A community whose traditional occupation is business and trade may discourage its young people from seeking employment elsewhere, and create an environment to divert their attention to get them engaged in the family business (Driver 1962; Dutta 1997 p.91). There is also an immense pressure from the same-caste members to establish a business of their own (Dutta, 1997 p.91). Thus, caste works as an institution (Dirks 2011 p.3) and persuades individuals to follow their family roots.

Caste-driven occupation was evident in a study conducted by R. G. Fox in the small town of Tezibazar, Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1967. Fox found that Vaishyas dominated small business, and that Brahmins were mostly engaged as Paurohitya (priests), and their visibility in business in was negligible (Desai 1971).

The question arises whether similar patterns continue in India today. Fox had conducted his study in a northern India, we chose to study a city of similar size in the south of India; the city was Udipi in the state of Karnataka. Business in Udipi consisted mostly of small retail and wholesale shops, and it soon became clear that in Udipi business was no longer the exclusive domain of Vaishyas: Although caste still largely dictates how people of the other castes choose their occupations, Brahmins were going into small business..

Udipi is an historically prominent city. Because it has many Hindu temples and Matts (monasteries), it has been called “the temple city of South India (Bhatt and Gopal 2006 p.370). It is also the birthplace of one of the Hindu religious cults, the Dvaita (dualistic) school of Philosophy, the founding father of which was Madhvacharya (1238–1317). With its religious fervour, the city has attracted tourists from all over the world. Today, the city comprises various small business shops in retail, wholesale, and small-scale manufacturing (CSO 2008). Udipi should ideally offer a case of strict adherence to traditional norms.

However, it has essentially “modern” schools and a growing number

of light industrial ventures (MSME-Development Institute 2013). It also hosts large-scale businesses in both private and public domains. Udupi exports cashew kernels, plastic, fishing nets, fishmeal, oil, and frozen fish. The city houses 187 commercial banks, 15 rural banks, and 34 cooperative banks that include two large nationalised banks; i.e., Corporation Bank and the Syndicate Bank. Moreover, Udupi has witnessed a surge in the growth of service sector industries, mainly related to communication, real estate, housing, hotels and restaurants (Government of Karnataka 2008). The city has proximity to other cities such as Kasaragod, Mangalore, Goa, and Mumbai.

The city's population was 125,350, and its literacy rate 93.89% (Census 2011), which is higher than that of large cities such as Nagpur (93.13%), Pune (91.61%), Chennai (90.33%) and Bangalore (87.67%) (Census 2011). This may partly explain the rising business interest in Udupi. Ninety-six percent of the people in Udupi had full-time employment (Government of Karnataka 2008).

Udupi has 35 municipal wards. For our study, we chose two significant wards, Shiribidu and Tenkapete, located in the centre of the city. These wards are the hubs of small business, and contain 2210 businesses that have more than 180 kinds of activities, mainly retail and wholesale. Shiribidu and Tenkapete were easily selected because people in them were very mobile and active from the business viewpoint. They involve a congregation of business activities, where multiple businesses share the same wall. In some instances, the same wall is shared by two rival businesses. We obtained the data on Shiribidu and Tenkapete's through the ledgers of the Udupi Municipal Corporation between 1st March 2010 and 8th March 2010.

We collected data showing the pattern of caste ownership. Eventually, we collected 230 samples, and conducted in-depth interviews with 24 small business owners who belonged to four caste groups (Viswakarma, Brahmin, Bandhari, and Padmashali). These four were selected because their members were known to indulge diligently in their traditional occupations.

Among the Hindu communities (there are some parts of the population who are not Hindu), the Brahmins own 35 percent of the businesses in Udupi, followed by the Kshatriyas (17%). This is a major shift from Fox's findings in northern India in 1967. In Udupi years later, Brahmins are steering the business wheel. Perhaps occupation such as trade has become a rising trend for Brahmins.

**TABLE 1: CASTE WISE CLASSIFICATION OF  
SMALL BUSINESS OWNERSHIP IN UDUPI (N=230)**

SL. NO		CASTE GROUP	% DISTRIBUTION
1	caste	Brahmin (“Superior Varna”)	35
2		Bunt (Kshatriya – “the second most superior Varna”)	17
3	Religion	Billava (Of the Other Backward Classes, OBC)	9
6		Viswakarma (OBC)	5
7	Hindu groups	Mogaveera (OBC)	4
8		Bandhari (OBC)	3
9		Other Hindus	13
<b>Sub-total</b>			<b>86%</b>
	Non-Hindu groups	Christian	7
		Muslim	7
<b>Sub-total</b>			<b>14</b>
<b>Total</b>			<b>100</b>

**Source: primary data**

The Brahmin community owned 26 percent of the business premises, which was the highest percentage for any group in Udupi. Hindu religious institutions known as Matts (monasteries) own 12 percent of the total business landscape in the city. As against the traditionally assigned roles of teaching religious scripts, and guiding their religious group on various matters concerning rituals, birth, death, reincarnation, Matts have entered the business space by converting parts of their land into commercial space. It is perhaps part of their self-sustenance strategy.

As we have seen, Brahmins have gone outside their traditional occupation. Have other caste groups done the same? We conducted in-depth interviews to find out, and those showed that for non-Brahmins caste and occupation meant the same. Caste dictated the nature of their occupation. For those interviewed, their participation in a small business occupation was not a self-made choice. Instead, it was all about the person’s family’s legacy, because the family had been involved in the

same work for generations. An institution like caste is so powerful that it imposes a feeling of being part of a legacy in which there is a close parallel between caste and occupation.

In the following narrative from an interview, the respondent seemed indifferent about his current occupation.

A barber (Bandhari): I am into this business because this has been our caste work. The Society also expects us to do this job because our caste members have been doing this (hair dress salon) job for the past years. I do not have anything else to say as to why I came into this business. It is clear to me that if I am in this business today, it is because of the caste (to which) I belong.

In a response similar to the barber's, a goldsmith attributed his/her reason to one of the dominant notions, Karma (duty). As per the Karma philosophy, an individual's occupation in the present life is inherited based on the previous life. To an extent, the individual seemed contented with whatever s/he has. In a way, individuals figure out a reason of their own whenever encountered with questions about why they are doing what they are doing.

A goldsmith (Viswakarma): For the past four generations, we have been in the occupation of making jewellery. This is our karma. We have to do whatever our destiny has given us.

Caste often operates as a compelling factor in causing youths to follow the roots of their lineage by adhering to the occupational 'legacy' of the family. Relatives and members of the caste have a bearing on the youths' choices and make them chose their family's caste-based occupation.

Another goldsmith: Somewhere mid-way, I wanted to give up on my family business and do something else, but it seemed almost impossible because our family well-wishers from our caste, who are now suppliers of inputs to our shop, had a say in my decision. Consultation and counselling from various people compelled me to continue in my family's business.

Caste groups create a structure that is almost similar to a business cartel to keep other caste groups at bay. In the case of small businesses and their owners, an artificial attempt to create a cartel is not necessary, as there is a socially knitted cartel in the form of caste groups. Often, each caste group attempts to safeguard the interest of its group. Further, caste-based social cartels act as a barrier to entry and exit for new caste groups.

A barber (Bandhari): We buy all our necessary products from a shop<sup>1</sup> that belongs to our community person. This is one of the ways we ensure our community member's occupation is also well protected. It is not that this is the only shop with all varieties of products in one place. However, as a community, it is essential for us to remain intact to nullify a possibility of another caste member's entry into this occupation. If at all some other caste person enters the business, it is almost sure that he/she would not sustain for a long time.

Besides generating a 'social business cartel', caste-based businesses pass the knowledge from one generation to the next. As is evident in the narrative, the members of each family tend to believe that they have a greater mastery over their work than their competitors because the occupation has been 'held' by their community for centuries.

A cloth weaver (Padmashali): Traditionally, ours is a weaver's family. All my family elders were did this job. By default, I became part of this work. As a weaver's family, we have proficiency in weaving. We know cloth better than anyone else does. That is why we continued to do this weaving and cloth selling work.

Contrary to what we have just seen, Brahmin respondents have often moved into commerce, selling products through small businesses while forgoing their traditional occupation of priesthood. From the following interview, it appears that the new generation of Brahmins seems to have often abandoned their traditional occupation in favour of commerce.

Musical instrument seller (Brahmin): My predecessors in the family have always been priests in one of the temples in the city (Udupi). Besides priesthood, my family members perform various religious rituals (naming ceremony, marriage, and death rituals). I somehow could not think that the old priesthood career would make me any better in the society. Therefore, I chose to move into a business activity. I do not really think I am compromising on my traditionally prescribed duties. Life is about survival and leading a happy life. As long as I get it from what I do, I am OK with it. Who really cares about what my tradition commands me to do?

Are the Brahmins, who are currently into business activity, caught in a duality of a traditional and modern set of occupations? There may not be a direct answer to this question. A form of silent rebellion can be seen in them, as they cannot accept the traditional norm that birth dictates the occupation of an individual. From the standard of conventions,

this is a remarkable change of tone in the discourse of caste, identity and occupation. Often, Brahmins were perceived to be those who kept the norms of religion intact. If they are breaking the norms, is it a beginning of the end of caste and birth-based occupation?

Restaurant owner (Brahmin): I do not know what is right or wrong. As long as I perform my puja (prayers) to God at home, I do not think; I will have to do anything different either by performing puja in the temple or participating in ritual ceremonies. God is a sarvantaryami (omnipresent), he/she knows whether I am doing the right thing. My simple philosophy is to do my duty to the best and leave the rest of the matter to God. Just because I am born in a Brahmin family, I do not have to do what is traditionally assigned to us. We are free to choose what we want.

At the same time, a few “backward caste groups” continue to possess faith in their family or caste-centric occupations. However, several of them have drifted from traditionally pre-defined occupations. For example, respondents from the Viswakarma (goldsmith) community had ventured in automobile selling, glass and plywood, and Ayurveda medicines as against their traditional occupation of jewellery design. Similarly, Bandhari (barber) communities switched over to new business occupations in tailoring, cloth selling, and watch repair.

## **Conclusion**

In the past, the upper caste and peasant class perceived the business class (mostly the Vaishyas) as having limited prestige in the caste and occupational hierarchy, because the business class supposedly engaged in unfair means (Dutta 1997 p.91). On the contrary, people belonging to the business class perceived the other castes as having limited prestige, because other caste groups seemed economically less powerful.

It is believed that the Brahmins were the ones who preached the caste-based labour division and directed the Hindu community to follow the doctrine of Karma by embracing the concept of caste-specific occupation to attain Moksha (salvation). Today, however, they are the ones who are conveniently switching from their traditional occupations. This is significant opens the possibility for all the communities to look beyond the constraints of Karma, because the proponents of Karma have themselves set an example by bidding adieu to their own traditionally defined occupation.

The famed Hindu scholar and Srinivas (1972) coined a term, ‘Sanskritization,’ to represent the dominant social movement in India until

the end of 20th century. The concept refers to the upward mobility of people. For instance, Dalits, Tribes and other lower caste people mimic the practices of higher Hindu castes in an endeavour to gain a higher status in the caste hierarchy. The trends in the present study, however, run contrary to what Srinivas articulated. An upper caste group such as Brahmin is looking downwardly to mimic the practices of Vaisyas, who are a rank lower than Brahmins in the Varna hierarchy. It shows that the patterns in modern India are undergoing a profound transformation as against the trends observed in the 20th century.

The present study is limited, as it could not capture the views of those who followed traditionally defined occupations within a Brahmin community and those who defied traditional occupations amongst the lower castes. Future studies can attempt to capture both the segments in detail and figure out the breadth and width of the issues. It would also be worthwhile to study whether other communities have ventured into what was the exclusive 'holding' (ritual performance of the Brahmanical community).

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