

Caste, Community, and Social Harmony: A Sociological Reading of Indian Knowledge Traditions

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the sociological understanding of caste and community in Indian knowledge systems and social harmony. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are contested systems of inheritance, and there are hierarchy, communitarian, devotional, heterodox, reformist and anti-caste traditions within them. Caste was depicted in classical sociological terms such as hierarchy, endogamy, occupation, ritual status and segmentation, and in postmodern terms, through social mobility, political economy, colonial classification, gender and democratic assertion. The paper summarizes the history of how caste communities have been used as markers of identity, means of livelihood (the occupation), sources of mutual assistance, sources of local regulation, and a source of dignity and social belonging, but also as restricting mobility and source of untouchability and inequality. It then looks at the counter traditions corresponding to the Buddhism and Phule-Ambedkarite thought, Bhakti and Sant tradition and the modern constitutional morality. But recent survey evidence shows a high level of mixing in terms of friendships and marriages between public tolerance and social closure. Survey findings indicate that there is considerable overlap between the public and social tolerances when it comes to friendships and marriages. The paper suggests that the idea of sustainable social harmony cannot coexist with the traditional hierarchical system. Any IKS framework that is justifiable in the social sense should differentiate between community solidarity and caste domination and reinterpret, through the lenses of dignity, equality, fraternity, dialogue and constitutional rights, inherited knowledge. This will allow an examination of Indian traditions as living tools to understand Indian society, and an opportunity for critical examination of power and exclusion.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, caste, community, social harmony, sociology, Ambedkar, Bhakti, social stratification, constitutional morality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian Knowledge Systems are becoming a part of the modern discourse on education, culture, heritage and intellectual decolonization. However, the critical question that needs to be addressed by any sociological work on IKS is the following one: How to understand and theorize knowledge traditions that have evolved in a highly hierarchical social environment? The importance of caste to that question is because the caste has been responsible for forming identity, marriage, labour, ritual, locality, political organisation, and access to social resources in many parts of South Asia. Caste has never been static and static, it is dynamic and dynamic in different places, different times. Hence continuity and change, order and inequality have to be considered in sociological analysis (Bayly, 1999; Jodhka, 2025).

Early sociological description was on the segmentation of the caste system, its hierarchical character, endogamy, occupational affiliation and differential privileges/disabilities (Ghurye, 1932). Louis Dumont later changed the definition of caste to an idea of hierarchy and purity/pollution, which he considered to be two fundamental elements of ideology (Dumont, 1998). These perspectives gave rise to the idea of how a social order could be reproduced through norms that constitute social groups with a recognized role and responsibility. But if harmony is considered as stability, then they do not have it. Dignity, Authority, resources and physical freedom can be unequally distributed in an orderly society. The criticism of Ambedkar was important because in his opinion caste was not a harmless distinction, but a system of inequality, based on endogamy and discrimination (Ambedkar, 2014).

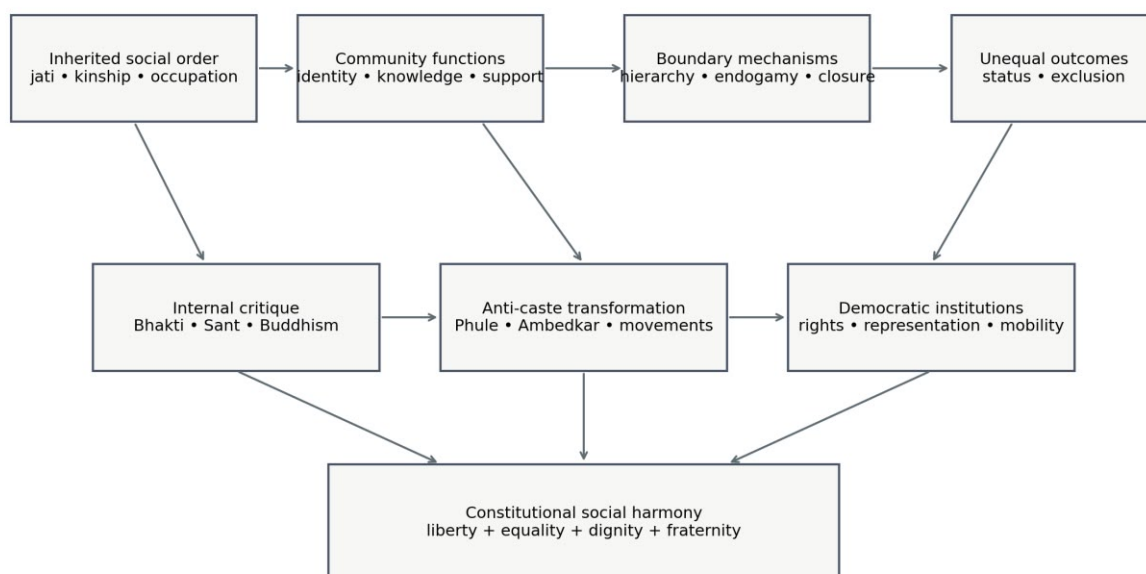
This paper thus poses three questions. In what ways has caste and community been an institution of knowledge, belonging and social coordination? Second, what sort of Indian intellectual and religious traditions were at odds with inherited hierarchy and expanded the moral vocabulary of equality? Thirdly, how is “social harmony” defined in a democratic and constitutional society? The argument that is developed here is that there are traditions of coherence and traditions of critique in Indian traditions. But only in this study is contemporary IKS scholarship at its strongest, otherwise it is a golden age or a catalogue of oppression.

In this context the method can be called a Sociological Approach.

This is a qualitative, interpretive study, drawing on classical Indian sociology, history, anti-caste literature, feminist literature, constitutional literature and survey evidence. It uses the notion of ‘caste social institution’ and ‘caste field of contestation’. This is important as “tradition” can obscure changes over time. Colonial enumeration and administration did order and fix caste identities, but caste remains the legacy of precolonial hierarchies and community divisions, which had their own histories (Bayly, 1999; Dirks, 2001). Similarly, modernization is not just eroded the caste system. With the rise of education, urbanization, electoral democracy, markets and migration, the spaces of caste have changed, and some ritual restrictions have been weakened while others have been strengthened, thereby changing the nature of the caste associations, political identities, marriage networks and new forms of social capital (Jodhka, 2015, 2025).

The term “Indian knowledge traditions” is used in the plural. They include normative Brahmanical traditions, local customary institutions, occupational and artisanal knowledge in communities, Buddhist and other heterodox critiques, modern constitutional frameworks, anti-caste intellectual traditions and Bhakti and Sant traditions (vernacular). Not that these are all intended to be stated the same. Rather, the technique is to take the parameters of social principles that they reproduce or challenge: hierarchy, reciprocity, duty, endogamy, inclusion, dignity, fraternity, equality.

From Caste-Bound Community to Constitutional Social Harmony



Original analytical framework: community cohesion is retained only where it is compatible with equal citizenship.

Figure 1. Analytical framework linking community, caste critique, democratic transformation, and constitutional social harmony.

Note. Original conceptual figure developed for this paper.

Table 1 Major Sociological Perspectives on Caste and Social Order

Perspective	Core idea	Contribution	Key limitation / critical question
Ghurye (1932)	Caste as segmented, hierarchical, endogamous social organization	Maps institutional features of caste	Can descriptive order obscure unequal power?
Dumont (1998)	Hierarchy and purity/pollution ideological principles as	Explains symbolic status beyond class	May understate political economy and resistance

Srinivas (1962)	Sanskritization and dominant caste	Shows mobility, adaptation, and local power	Mobility may occur without ending hierarchy
Béteille (2012)	Caste, class, and power can diverge	Links stratification to economic and political change	Requires historically specific analysis
Ambedkar (2014)	Caste as graded inequality sustained by social separation and endogamy	Centers dignity, fraternity, and annihilation of caste	Challenges order-centered models directly
Dirks (2001) / Bayly (1999)	Caste reshaped by colonial knowledge and historical processes	Historicizes apparently timeless categories	Colonial codification should not be mistaken for sole origin

2. Castes and Social Order, Community and Knowledge

Social identity has traditionally been associated with community, kinship, work, and place of residence, as well as ritual belongings. These were the six important formulation factors emphasized by Ghurye (1932): segmental division, hierarchical ranking, limits on social interaction, differential civil and religious rights, occupational patterns, and endogamy. These attributes were likely to establish relatively stable social boundaries. In certain contexts, organization around jati was also a network of support, a system of conflict resolution, a training ground for occupations, a system of marriage alliances, and a collective voice. This is important from IKS because a lot of practical knowledge (craft technique, farming practice, performance tradition, healing, food production and specialised labour) was passed on informally from families and communities.

But the social context of knowledge is inescapably linked with the distribution of power. Socio-economic specialisation can help to maintain advanced skills, but socio-economic inheritance can also limit choice and level of labour ranking. Social security can be given to the community members through a sense of community solidarity, and the outsiders may be excluded. Local councils can effectively settle disputes without reinforcing patriarchy or caste hierarchy. A sociological analysis thus must separate reciprocity from imposed dependency. As caste, class and power were not mutually exclusive but also distinct, they could overlap in Béteille's village study as land relations, political institutions, education and economic opportunities shifted (Béteille, 2012). This glimpse breaks the myth of the fixed cultural blueprint of caste.

The reason caste cannot be simply equated with an economic class system is that Dumont emphasized hierarchy. Ritual status, commensality, marriage and symbolic difference have been important factors as well as material factors (Dumont, 1998). But critics have pointed out that such an ideological version can de-emphasize the nature of coercion, property, labour, and politics. Ambedkar's solution is to change the view: The question of social science is not how hierarchy is coherent, but how graded inequality makes collective solidarity incoherent. Following the analysis, caste does not allow the formation of general social fraternity because each group is pushed to reinforce the boundary, the relative rank (Ambedkar, 2014). From this point of view, achieving social harmony means breaking relations that deny the equal moral status of people instead of merely optimizing cooperation within the existing hierarchy.

Table 2 *Indian Knowledge Traditions: Community Functions and Sociological Tensions*

Tradition / institution	Potential community function	Sociological tension	Democratic reinterpretation
Jati / kin networks	Mutual aid, identity, knowledge transmission	Endogamy, closure, ranked status	Voluntary association without inherited disability
Occupational communities	Skill preservation and apprenticeship	Hereditary labour and unequal valuation	Open access, credit to knowledge holders, occupational choice
Customary local councils	Mediation and local coordination	Dominant-caste and patriarchal authority	Rights-based, representative local institutions
Bhakti / Sant traditions	Vernacular devotion and moral community	Egalitarian language did not always dissolve caste	Use equality-centered teachings without romanticization
Buddhist / anti-caste traditions	Critique of inherited status and moral hierarchy	Historically diverse institutional outcomes	Dignity, ethical agency, and equal citizenship

Modern constitutional tradition	Common civic status across communities	Gap between formal rights and social practice	Liberty, equality, fraternity, anti-discrimination
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Note. The table is an analytical synthesis. It distinguishes the existence of community functions from the normative legitimacy of caste hierarchy.

3. Hierarchy and endogamic production of community as sexuality.

One of the most persistent ways in which caste boundaries are reproduced is in the form of marriage. The first definition of caste by Ambedkar also assigns the role of 'circularity of marriage' as the central feature of a caste, where social groups find themselves in the position of self-reproduction within it (Ambedkar, 2014). That is why even after the restrictions are lifted on the occupations, a caste system can persist. A person can have a job, educational institution, and can live in very mixed environments, and yet family strategies be centered on caste identity.

This analysis is supplemented by feminist sociology which shows that the reproduction of caste is a gendered process as well. Chakravarti (2003) believes that the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, inheritance and reproductive decisions plays a significant role in the caste hierarchy. Then, the language of 'honour' might be a means of policing intimate choices in the community. It's hard to romance a community harmony story. The answer is that it can be a cohesive community without being an egalitarian community, and that it can be women's community, lower status group members' community, dissenters' community, or inter-caste couples' community that suffer for cohesive community.

Family and community are also significant resources of care, identity, language, memory and intergenerational knowledge. The sociological issue isn't the community, but the transformation of the community into a forced hierarchy. A democratic approach to IKS should therefore involve voluntary cultural associations, sharing and passing on of local knowledge, intergenerational knowledge and learning, mutual aid, and not coercing marriage, occupation, residence, worship or social interaction. This makes distinctions on the grounds of social value of being apart from the inherited inequality.

Every one of these traditions sought to overcome the caste system by challenging its harmful implications. All of these traditions were attempting to eradicate the caste system by pointing out the negative aspects of it.

There are also significant oppositional voices against inheritance in the history of ideas in India. The cultural traditions of Buddhism offered new possibilities for defying Brahmanical notions of ritual supremacy and redefining ethical merit, discipline, suffering, and liberation. The modern anti-caste thinkers, especially Ambedkar, appropriated Buddhism for the purposes of equality and emancipation as a moral and social weapon. (Omvedt, 2003) This is crucial for IKS as it ensures that "Indian tradition" is not considered synonymous only with elite textual traditions. There are also practices for dissent, which are a reminiscence of the Indian knowledge history.

Bhakti is also important but needs to be differentiated. Diverse regional, linguistic, sectarian and historical formations can be lost in the modern notion of a single pan-Indian "Bhakti movement" (Hawley, 2015). In certain devotional practices, religious expression was provided in the vernacular, and emphasis placed on devotion rather than one's inherited ritual status. The power of the Sant as a means of anti-caste memory was amplified because of their poetry questioning the superiority of the castes and their exclusive right to ritual. The poetry of the Sant people questioned notions of status differences, ritual monopoly and social pride and had a greater effect on anti-caste memory. But not all Bhakti-relines were structurally non-caste and nor were religious languages automatically egalitarian. Critical sociology must thus be able to differentiate symbolic equality, spiritual access and institutional reform from the actual transformation of social relations.

The anti-caste movement got more explicit in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The struggle against Brahmanical domination and non-Brahmanism organizations, with the Dalit mobilization and Ambedkarite politics, changed the nature of the caste issue to one of representation, education, rights, dignity and state power (Omvedt, 1994; Rao, 2009). These motions are not extralegal to Indian knowledge traditions, but they're struggles with the meaning of justice within Indian society. They started to add to the social archive, conceptualizing the experiences of the oppressed as knowledge rather than a problem that could be solved.

It is a plural intellectual heritage that is more social harmony. Harmony doesn't have to be sameness, and equality doesn't always have to be cultural erasure. A democratic social ethic does not demean a person's value or occupation, or his civic role or freedom of association, based on his birth.

There is a significant gap between social mobility and the dominant caste as well as democratic transformation.

M. N. Srinivas added a dynamic element to the understanding of caste from the static description to a process of change. His concept of Sanskritization was the attempt of the lower or middle groups to elevate their social status by adopting the behaviours of the locally more prestigious caste groups (Srinivas, 1962). However, the concept proved it was possible to negotiate caste ranking, but also that mobility within a hierarchy did not necessarily destroy hierarchy. It is possible for a group to cross over to a higher ground and yet accept the symbolic hierarchy of groups in the first place.

The concept of a “dominant caste” was also associated with three other elements in Srinivas' mind: number, land and education, and politics. This was particularly important for comprehending democratic India, as electoral politics did not supplant caste – it opened new avenues for caste groups to organize, bargain, and compete. Jaffrelot (2003) discusses the political rise of the lower castes and shift in power in North India. With political salience of caste identity, democratic representation can thus help to weaken the old monopolies.

Again, with modern change - Béteille shows it. Today, economic class, political power, education and ritual rank are no longer as correlated as in the previous agricultural systems (Béteille, 2012). This disparity may also contribute to mobility and to the establishment of new alliances but may also create new inequalities. The caste-like hierarchy is far more apparent today in network, associations, electoral lists, marriage markets, schools and professions than in ritual segregation (Jodhka, 2015, 2025).

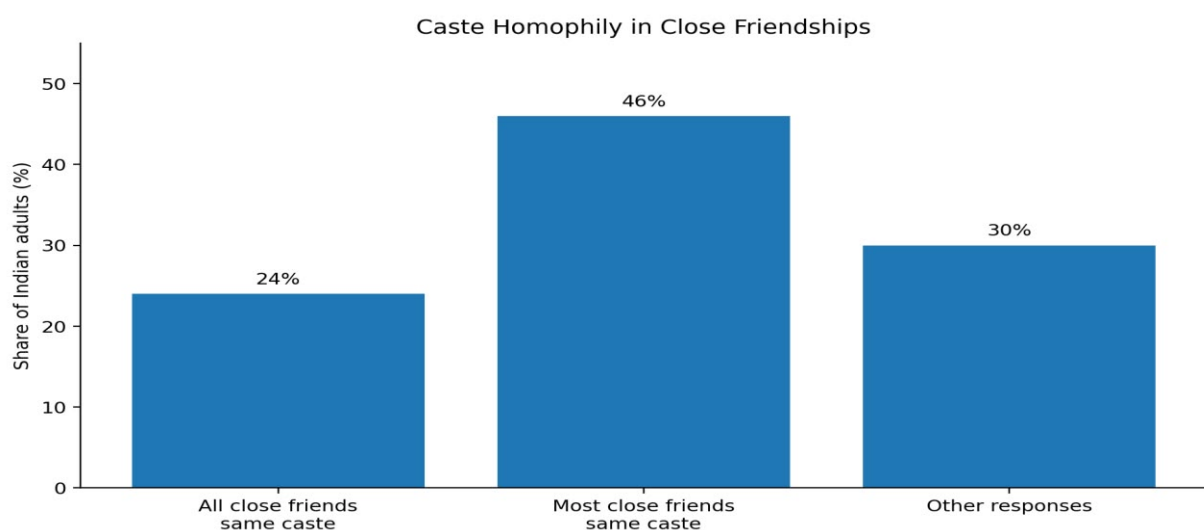
Such a change in form implies a sociological rethinking of the concept of community. Community groups can become educational, welfare, political and collective bargaining groups. In the past, the rights of historically marginalised communities were denied by the claim of supposedly universal social orders, so that they had to mobilise by their identity for their rights to be recognised. It's not a conclusion that there's no need for social harmony if there is no need for protest. Conflict can be a beneficial process in discovering unequal institutions and in paving the way to more inclusive settlements.

This paper will explore the social barriers of the current era and the importance of tolerance, friendship and marriage for the maintenance of these barriers.

The juxtaposition of civic coexistence and intimate social closure is illustrated by current evidence of survey. In 2019-2020, a sample of 29,999 adults from all over India were surveyed and 24% of them said that all close friends were from their own caste, while 46% said that most of their close friends were from their own caste. As a result, 70% of those who indicate that they have close friends indicated that most or all of their close friends were of the same caste as themselves (Pew Research Center, 2021). The same study found that there was a high amount of opposition to inter-caste marriage: 64 percent say it is very important to prevent women in their community from marrying outside of their caste, and 62 percent say that is the case for men as well (Pew Research Center, 2021).

The results should be taken with a grain of salt. They do not reflect discrimination by any of the individual respondents and national averages mask wide regional, educational, religious and caste differences. The survey, however, also showed that there is considerable acceptance of a Scheduled Caste neighbor among people from other castes, which means there are caste differences in social distance by domain (Pew Research Center, 2021). The sociologic pattern is not a straightforward hostility. Someone can be tolerant and accepting of others, yet be firm in their friendships, familial relationships and marriage.

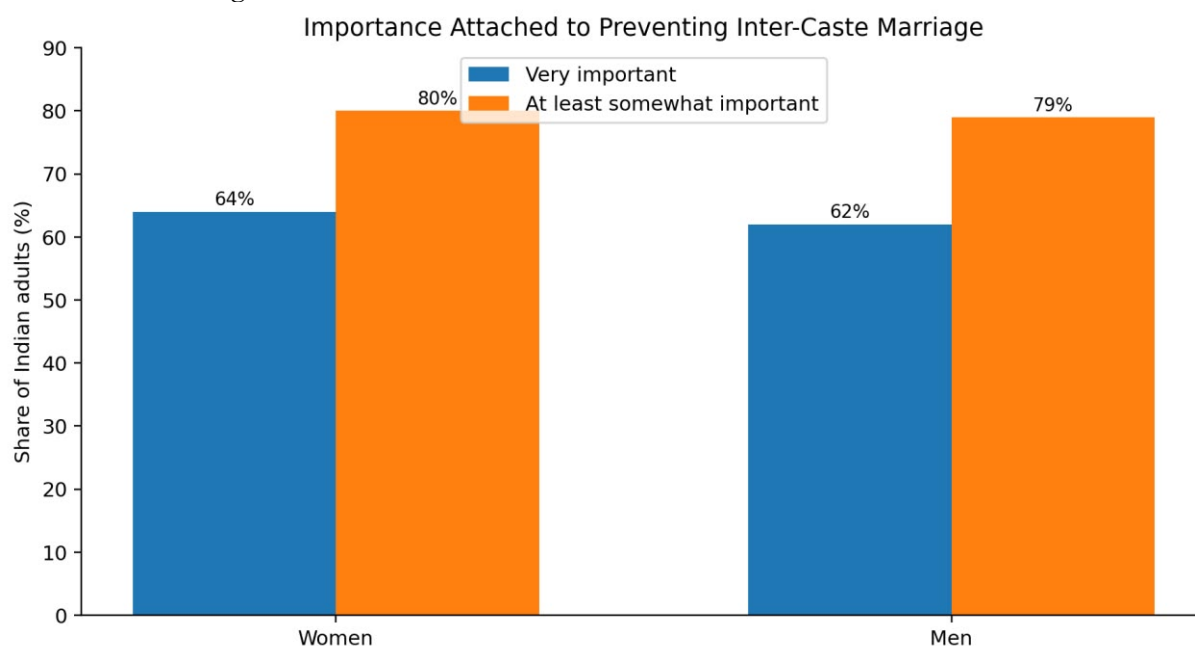
The point is vital to the concept of social harmony. Apart from living does not necessarily result in fraternity but may help to reduce conflict. Ambedkar's critique is valid insofar as fraternity is a relationship of citizens as equals, rather than citizens from confined groups as equals. So, a sociology of today ought not only to examine the issue of "communities" co-existence, but who is allowed to cross the boundaries, share the institutions, marry freely, be recognized, and be a part of common community life.



Source: Pew Research Center (2021). 'Other responses' is derived as 100% – 24% – 46%.

Graph 1. Distribution of responses about the caste composition of close friendships.

Note. Data are from Pew Research Center (2021), based on a nationally representative survey of 29,999 Indian adults conducted face-to-face from November 2019 to March 2020. Percentages are attitudinal indicators and do not imply uniform behavior across regions or communities.



Source: Pew Research Center (2021). 'At least somewhat important' includes 'very important.'

Graph 2. Attitudes toward preventing men and women from marrying outside their caste.

Note. Data are from Pew Research Center (2021), based on a nationally representative survey of 29,999 Indian adults conducted face-to-face from November 2019 to March 2020. Percentages are attitudinal indicators and do not imply uniform behavior across regions or communities.

4. Such harmony in the society must be interpreted in the Constitution to ensure democracy – Rule of the people.

Independent India changed the concept of the social order by institutionalizing equality, freedom, dignity and non-discrimination as political commitments in the country's constitution. The Constitution of India, 1950, bans any state discrimination based on caste (Article 15), equality of opportunity in public appointments (Article 16) and provides for special provision for backward classes (Article 17) and untouchability, which is abolished and forbidden in any form. These provisions are not a social ban on caste but do provide an ethical and legal benchmark to assess inherited practices. Constitutional morality is not a phenomenon that is hostile to the Indian knowledge traditions; it can be viewed as part of the modern Indian intellectual tradition that emerged from a debate between the nationalists, anti-caste thinkers, social reformers, minorities, women and the makers of the Constitution. The key points of Ambedkar's contribution can be summarised as follows: 'political democracy is social democracy' (Ambedkar, 2014); social democracy can be defined as to organise society based on liberty, equality and fraternity – rather than based on graded status.

New structure of the word harmony. Harmony cannot ask the marginalised groups to be silent for the comfort of the dominant groups. Nor should justice be done to the detriment of the people born into certain castes. The concepts of institutions, opportunities, representation, discrimination and social relations give the foundation to democratic sociology. It searches for 'cultural commonality', finds space for cultural difference and equal citizenship.

It is also important to have socio-knowledge about positive discrimination and anti-discrimination policies. Their reactions are to disadvantages of access to education, public employment, property, networks and dignity which they have accumulated through history. The relevance of the findings of this research is that it has been recorded that caste exclusion is continuing even when the economic transactions are neutral (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Other kinds of agencies can also emerge from the dynamics of education, political inclusion, mobility, and intergroup interaction. With institutional equality, social harmony is increased because there is no need to settle for subordination to maintain peace. Therefore, some implications for Indian Knowledge Systems Education and Research are forwarded below:

The National Education Policy of 2020 has regained focus on Indian knowledge, which can be used to convey social traditions in a richer historical context and methodological pluralism (Ministry of Education, 2020). Caste should not be depicted as the 'essence of India' or as a past thing. The students should be made familiar with classical sociological

models, regional history, community knowledge, bhakti and heterodox traditions, anti-caste thoughts, feminist critique, dalit intellectual traditions and constitutional laws.

The following are three principles that are useful particularly. First, there is the requirement to keep knowledge and not naturalise hierarchy. The different forms of knowledge (artisanal, ecological, linguistic, medicinal, musical, agricultural and community) are to be documented and attributed to the communities holding the knowledge, but hereditary occupation should not be romanticized. Second, communicate traditions in dialogue. Ghurye, Dumont, Srinivas, Béteille, the scholarships inspired by Ambedkar have different questions; they have different ideas for disagreeing, and that is good intellectual work. Third, take a participatory and dignitarian approach to social harmony! A harmonious institution is an institution where one can collaborate with someone across differences without losing his or her rights and equality.

Theories of socialization can also be explored through IKS research to inform our understanding of how communities relate to each other in the transmission of knowledge; how they are linked in the construction of trust; how they engage in the management of common life; how they are connected in the construction of community identity; how they are connected in the mechanisms of closure; and how they are connected in the mechanisms of exclusion. This is an important viewpoint to protect cultural complexity and democratic equality.

5. Conclusion

The double inheritance suggests the caste and the Indian knowledge tradition can be viewed from a sociological perspective. Caste communities have been places of identity, knowledge, help and community organisation as well as places of hierarchy, exclusion, hereditary labour, endogamy, and unequal dignity. The classical sociologies provide some context for the persistence of caste as an institution, and anti-caste and feminist traditions of thought provide a sense of the costs of an order-centred perspective. But critique and aspirational equality is also firmly entrenched in the intellectual history of India as seen in historical Bhakti, Buddhist, reformist, Dalit and constitutional traditions.

Social harmony, therefore, would have to be understood in terms of equality of belonging, rather than in terms of stability of hierarchy. The most positive use of IKS today is to question traditions, gather knowledge and community wisdom and to respect the knowledge holders and reimagine collective life as free, equal, dignified and fraternal. It is ethically acceptable to democratic India and socially sound as well.

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