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What comes after caste? social order, moral regulation and the search for stability in Post-Traditional Indian Society

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Abstract
Caste has long worked as the deepest organizing force of Indian society shaping everyday life through inherited status, moral expectations and shared ideas about belonging. It did more than rank people. It quietly regulated behaviour, limited choices, provided a stable, if unequal, social order. In recent decades, however, this structure has begun to weaken. Economic change, education, migration and the spread of market life have reduced the everyday power of caste rules even as caste identities continue to appear in politics, religion, and public debate. This shift raises a difficult question that is often avoided as what holds society together when caste no longer performs its earlier role, and no equally strong system stands in its place? This paper argues that India is not moving toward a casteless society but toward a post-traditional condition marked by moral uncertainty, fragile social bonds and unstable forms of regulation. As caste weakens as a lived structure, gaps emerge in moral guidance, community support, shared expectations etc. producing anxiety rather than simple freedom. These gaps are only partly filled by the market, the state and political identity, each of which regulates social life in limited and uneven ways. Drawing on classical social theory and contemporary Indian experience, the paper shows how caste has shifted from an everyday system of regulation to a symbolic and institutional presence that still shapes life chances without providing social stability. The argument moves beyond debates about the survival or decline of caste to focus on the deeper problem of social order asking how Indian society seeks balance, meaning, continuity in the uncertain space that follows the weakening of its most enduring structure.

Keywords: Caste, post-caste society, social order, moral regulation, anomie, inequality, identity, Modern India, social change, stratification

Introduction

Caste has endured as the most deeply rooted principle of social organization in Indian society not simply because it divided people into ranked groups but because it quietly structured everyday life in ways that were rarely questioned and almost never optional shaping who one could marry, what kind of work felt possible, how respect was shown and how moral worth was measured in ordinary interactions, so much so that for a long time social order itself appeared natural rather than constructed (Dumont, 1970; Srinivas, 1962) [16, 27]. This endurance is often explained by placing caste firmly within Hindu religious thought yet such a narrow framing misses the larger sociological point because caste has functioned less as a theological rulebook and more as a social grammar that travelled across religious boundaries and settled into different communities wherever historical conditions allowed it to do so. This becomes clear once attention shifts away from doctrine and toward practice where caste-like divisions appear among Indian Christians through inherited status distinctions and marriage boundaries, among Muslims through the well-documented Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal hierarchy, among Sikh communities despite strong egalitarian teachings and within many settled and semi-settled tribal groups where contact with agrarian society, the state, and the market has produced internal ranking over time (Béteille, 1991; Fuller, 1996) [7, 19]. These patterns suggest that caste cannot be reduced to Hindu belief alone because its strength lies in its capacity to organize social relations in a stable and predictable way regardless of the religious language used to justify or deny it. In this sense caste historically operated as a total social structure regulating identity by fixing a person's place at birth, guiding occupation by linking work to inherited status, enforcing marriage rules through endogamy, shaping moral conduct by attaching honour and shame to group behaviour and governing everyday interaction through subtle codes of distance and respect that were learned early and rarely forgotten (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Béteille, 1969) [2, 6]. This mattered deeply for social order. It created inequality, yes, but it also created certainty and that certainty reduced conflict by limiting choice. People knew where they stood. That knowledge, however unequal, kept society steady. A system like this does not fade quietly. It unravels unevenly. In contemporary India, the social ground beneath caste has begun to shift under the pressure of economic liberalization, expanding education, large-scale urban migration and the spread of digital life all of which loosen the hold of inherited roles while demanding constant self-adjustment from individuals who must now compete for space in markets, institutions, and public culture (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000) [4, 20]. These changes have weakened the everyday authority of caste rules especially in cities and among younger generations yet they have not produced a clear replacement capable of organizing moral life with the same force. Something is missing. The market regulates through price and competition, the state through law and bureaucracy and education through credentials but none of these systems offers the dense moral guidance or sense of belonging that caste once provided, even to those it oppressed. This gap becomes visible in growing social anxiety, sharper identity claims and a restless search for stability that appears in politics, religion and public debate,

often at the same time. The central question of this paper grows from this uneasy space that what happens to social order, moral regulation and collective stability when caste weakens as a lived structure but no equally strong alternative steps in to take its place? Classical sociology offers a useful lens here particularly Durkheim's idea that social order depends on shared moral regulation and that its breakdown produces anomie, a condition marked by uncertainty, confusion and rising strain (Durkheim, 1897/2002) [18]. Read through this lens, the weakening of caste does not automatically signal progress or freedom; it signals transition, and transitions are rarely calm. Weber's discussion of status groups further sharpens the picture by showing how systems of social closure can survive even when their visible forms change, shifting from ritual rules to education, lifestyle and networks while continuing to shape life chances in quiet but powerful ways (Weber, 1978) [30]. Ambedkar's insistence that caste is a social system rather than a religious one remains central here because it directs attention to structure instead of belief and to the problem of what replaces caste once its authority begins to fade (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. The argument advanced in this paper is that India is not moving toward a casteless society despite frequent claims to the contrary but toward a post-traditional, post-caste condition marked by uncertainty, moral fragmentation and unstable forms of regulation where old hierarchies lose their everyday grip yet continue to shape outcomes through new and less visible paths. This condition does not remove inequality. It rearranges it. And in doing so, it raises a deeper sociological problem that cannot be answered by celebrating decline or mourning persistence alone like how a society long held together by a single, deeply embedded structure searches for order, meaning, and balance once that structure no longer fully works but still refuses to disappear.

Caste as a Civilizational Social Structure: Beyond Religion

Caste is often explained as if it were primarily a matter of belief, a religious doctrine rooted in Hindu texts and ritual ideas yet this explanation collapses once attention shifts from scripture to social life because what sustained caste across centuries was not theology alone but practice, repetition and everyday acceptance, the quiet learning of who sits where, marries whom, speaks first, eats last and carries which kind of dignity into public space (Dumont, 1970; Srinivas, 1962) [16, 27]. This distinction matters. Caste as religious doctrine refers to textual justifications, symbolic rankings, cosmological claims about purity, duty and hierarchy, but caste as social practice operates through habits, expectations and informal rules that do not require belief to function and do not disappear simply because belief changes. This is why caste logic survived religious conversion so easily in the Indian context. Among Indian Christians, especially in regions with long missionary presence caste distinctions were carried into church organization, burial grounds, marriage circles and denominational life producing Dalit Christian communities that remained socially separate from upper-caste converts despite shared faith and ritual participation, a pattern documented repeatedly in sociological and historical studies (Béteille, 1991; Webster, 1992) [7, 31]. Something similar unfolded among Indian Muslims where the Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal hierarchy reproduced graded social distance through lineage, occupation and marriage norms even as Islamic theology emphasized equality before God showing again that social ranking did not require religious sanction to endure (Ahmad, 1978; Jodhka, 2015) [1, 23]. Sikh society presents an equally telling case. Despite a strong egalitarian tradition and explicit rejection of caste hierarchy in doctrine, caste identities remained active in marriage practices, village life and political organization particularly among Jat Sikhs and Dalit Sikhs revealing how deeply social habits can resist theological correction when they are tied to land, power and status (Judge, 2002; Puri, 2003) [26]. Tribal groups, often imagined as outside caste society complicate the picture further. While many tribal communities historically organized themselves through kinship and clan rather than caste, processes of sedentarization, interaction with agrarian society, state administration and market integration gradually introduced internal ranking, occupational differentiation, symbolic hierarchy creating caste-like stratification that operated without reference to Hindu doctrine but closely mirrored its social logic (Béteille, 1998; Xaxa, 2008) [8, 33]. These cases point to a simple but unsettling insight. Caste did not spread because people believed in it. It spread because it worked as a social ordering device. It offered predictability. That mattered. At its core, caste functioned as a system of social closure in the Weberian sense restricting access to resources, honour and opportunity through inherited membership while presenting these restrictions as normal and long-standing rather than actively enforced. Through this closure, caste produced not only inequality but a shared moral map of society, a rough but widely understood sense of who owed what to whom, who could cross which boundary and which transgressions demanded punishment or forgiveness. This moral map was learned early and carried quietly. It did not need constant explanation. It shaped interaction automatically. That is why caste could operate across religions and regions with remarkable consistency adjusting its surface language while preserving its deeper logic. Over time, this logic hardened into what can be described as a civilizational grammar of inequality, a set of social rules embedded so deeply in everyday life that they came to feel like common sense rather than domination, order rather than power (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Béteille, 1969) [4, 6]. Seen this way, caste was never only a Hindu institution. It was a mode of organizing society that attached moral value to birth, stabilized expectations and limited conflict by sharply narrowing choice. This is precisely why its weakening creates unease far beyond Hindu social life. When caste loosens, it is not just ritual hierarchy that fades; an entire background structure that once guided behaviour, restrained ambition, absorbed social tension begins to fragment. The implications are therefore civilizational not sectarian. Economic change, urban migration, education and legal equality have weakened caste as an everyday regulator but they have not replaced its moral function with something equally dense or widely shared. The market ranks by money, the state judges by law and education sorts by credentials yet none of these systems tells people how to live with one another in intimate social space or how to translate competition into moral restraint (Polanyi, 1944; Giddens, 1991) [20, 25]. As caste loses its taken-for-granted authority, the absence is felt across communities including those that once claimed distance from it. This is the deeper implication that often goes unspoken. Weakening caste does

not simply liberate individuals from hierarchy; it destabilizes a long-standing social grammar that structured Indian society as a whole producing a condition in which inequality persists, boundaries blur and the search for moral order becomes more urgent precisely because no single system now holds the centre.

Theoretical Framework

Any serious attempt to understand what follows the weakening of caste must begin with the problem of social order itself because caste was never only a hierarchy of rank but a working system of moral regulation that quietly held everyday life together, a point that becomes clear once Durkheim's ideas on solidarity and anomie are placed next to the Indian case rather than treated as distant European theory. Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity helps explain why caste endured for so long as in societies where social roles are fixed, inherited and morally charged, cohesion does not arise from choice or contract but from shared obligations that feel natural precisely because they are not debated and caste fitted this pattern closely by binding people to group-based duties, expectations and limits that reduced uncertainty even while reproducing inequality (Durkheim, 1893/1984) [17]. This mattered. It kept life predictable. Caste functioned as a moral regulatory system by telling individuals what was expected of them before conflict could even arise, defining proper conduct, acceptable ambition and legitimate interaction in ways that were learned early and reinforced daily which meant that social order was maintained less through punishment than through habit. When this kind of regulation weakens, Durkheim warns, society does not immediately become freer or more equal; it becomes normless, a condition he described as anomie where rules lose clarity, desires expand without restraint and individuals struggle to align personal goals with collective limits (Durkheim, 1897/2002) [18]. In contemporary India, the erosion of caste authority resembles this condition closely because inherited moral boundaries have loosened faster than new ones have formed producing anxiety, competition and a restless search for recognition rather than stable integration. Weber's contribution sharpens this picture by shifting attention from moral cohesion to power and closure. For Weber, caste can be understood as a form of status group organization where social honour is distributed unequally and protected through rules of exclusion that restrict marriage, social contact and access to valued resources, all justified as tradition rather than domination (Weber, 1978) [30]. Seen this way, caste's strength lay not only in belief but in closure, in the ability of groups to monopolize advantage by naturalizing boundaries. What is striking in the Indian case is that this closure has proven remarkably flexible. Even as occupational heredity weakens and formal equality expands, status closure persists through education, language, networks and lifestyle allowing old hierarchies to survive in new forms. The decline of caste as an occupational system, therefore, does not automatically dissolve caste as a status order; it displaces it into less visible arenas where exclusion becomes harder to name but no less effective. Ambedkar's analysis cuts deeper by refusing to treat caste as a cultural leftover or a moral failing and instead naming it as a system of graded inequality, a structure that distributes respect and humiliation in carefully ranked layers ensuring that each group looks down on another even as it is oppressed from above (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. This insight matters because it exposes the limits of reform that targets attitudes or rituals without altering structure. Ambedkar argued that caste is social before it is religious which explains why it survives conversion, legal prohibition and moral condemnation, and why its weakening creates confusion rather than clarity when no alternative structure is built to replace its regulatory role. Reform without replacement leaves a gap. That gap is now visible. Contemporary social theory helps make sense of what fills this space, though only partially. Theories of individualization describe how modern societies push individuals to construct their own lives, careers, and identities freeing them from inherited roles but also burdening them with constant choice and responsibility, a process that can deepen insecurity when social support is weak (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) [5]. In India, this shift is uneven. Individuals are told they are free yet they remain tied to background conditions shaped by caste history producing frustration rather than empowerment. The expansion of market society adds another layer. Markets regulate behaviour through competition and price not through shared moral limits, and while they can reward effort, they also widen gaps and make failure feel personal rather than structural displacing moral questions into technical ones about skill, efficiency and merit (Polanyi, 1944; Bauman, 2000) [4, 25]. When market logic spreads into education, work and even intimate life, it weakens older forms of moral restraint without offering a convincing substitute for collective responsibility. The result is not moral chaos in a dramatic sense but a thinner moral world where rules exist but lack shared meaning, and where individuals must navigate competing demands from the state, the market, and identity politics without a common frame to reconcile them. This is the core argument that ties these theoretical strands together as the decline of caste does not lead directly to equality or freedom but produces a regulatory vacuum, a space where old norms no longer command obedience and new ones lack legitimacy leaving society in a state of prolonged transition. Durkheim helps explain why this feels destabilizing, Weber shows how inequality adapts rather than disappears, Ambedkar reveals why surface reform fails without structural change and contemporary theory highlights the strain placed on individuals asked to carry the weight of social integration alone. Together, these perspectives suggest that the real problem facing post-traditional Indian society is not whether caste survives or vanishes but how social order is maintained when its most durable structure weakens without a morally dense and widely accepted alternative to take its place.

What Does 'Weakening of Caste' Actually Mean?

When caste is said to be weakening in present-day India, the phrase often sounds more decisive than the reality it describes because what is unfolding is not a clean break but a slow thinning of authority, a process in which certain functions lose their grip while others continue quietly in altered forms shaping outcomes without announcing themselves openly (Srinivas, 1962; Béteille, 1991) [7, 27]. This difference between erosion and destruction is crucial. Destruction would suggest that caste no longer matters in any meaningful way. Erosion points instead to uneven loss where some rules fade quickly while others remain

embedded in habits, expectations and institutional routines. What has weakened most clearly are those aspects of caste that relied on close, repeated supervision within stable local settings. Rules surrounding ritual purity once governed everyday contact in visible ways deciding who could eat together or share space but such rules have become difficult to maintain in towns, cities, schools, transport systems and digital environments where constant proximity makes strict separation impractical even when discomfort or prejudice continues beneath the surface (Dumont, 1970; Fuller, 1996) [16, 19]. The link between caste and inherited work has also loosened. This has not happened because caste ideas suddenly lost moral force but because economic change disrupted the conditions that made fixed occupational roles workable in the first place. Migration, schooling and the spread of new kinds of work pulled people into jobs unrelated to ancestral position weakening direct control while leaving background inequalities largely untouched (Béteille, 1969; Deshpande, 2011) [6, 14]. A similar shift can be seen in rural life where the old jajmani system that once tied families together through long-term service relations has largely broken down, replaced by cash transactions, state welfare and short-term labour arrangements that remove obligation without creating lasting security making everyday survival more uncertain than before (Wiser & Wiser, 1971; Breman, 1996) [12, 32]. These changes are often taken as evidence that caste is disappearing. That conclusion does not hold. Other elements of caste remain remarkably steady especially those that operate away from public view and shape life indirectly rather than through open enforcement. Boundaries around intimacy continue to matter, even among educated and urban groups, where family expectations and community pressures still guide personal choices in ways that are rarely described as caste-based but follow familiar lines nonetheless (Banerjee *et al*., 2013; Desai & Dubey, 2012) [3, 13]. Informal connections rooted in shared background continue to influence access to opportunities whether in housing, employment or local politics, working through trust and familiarity rather than explicit exclusion which allows inequality to persist without appearing deliberate (Jodhka, 2015) [23]. Discrimination has not vanished either. It has become quieter. Instead of open refusal, it appears through assumptions about competence, reliability or fit, aligning easily with the language of merit and neutrality while reproducing old gaps in new settings (Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Thorat & Newman, 2010) [24, 28]. At the same time, caste has gained new visibility as a symbol rather than a rulebook especially in political life and public culture where it is invoked to claim recognition, voice and dignity rather than to regulate daily conduct marking a shift in function rather than a loss of relevance (Jaffrelot, 2003) [22]. This change signals a deeper transformation in how caste operates. Earlier, it structured everyday behaviour directly. It set limits before questions arose. Today, it works more as a background force that shapes who advances smoothly and who encounters repeated friction influencing outcomes without dictating conduct. This is the key point. Caste no longer organizes all of life but it continues to shape life chances. Weber's idea of social closure helps explain how this is possible because closure does not depend on visible rules once advantage has been institutionalized; it survives through inherited starting points that appear normal over time even when the system that produced them is said to be fading (Weber, 1978) [30]. In contemporary India, caste has been absorbed into institutions that present themselves as impartial including education systems, markets, and bureaucratic procedures where unequal resources quietly convert into unequal results. Ambedkar's analysis remains central here. He warned that caste would outlive legal reform and moral criticism because it was social before it was religious and because its graded structure allowed it to adjust rather than collapse under pressure (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. What we see today supports this view. The weakening of caste has not removed hierarchy; it has rearranged it. Direct control has softened while indirect advantage has hardened. This creates a condition in which individuals experience greater choice in some areas but sharper constraint in others often without a clear account of why effort does not lead to equal reward. The language of merit fills this gap offering an explanation that feels fair while masking the continued influence of inherited conditions (Bourdieu, 1986; Deshpande, 2017) [11, 15]. This also explains why caste remains politically active even as its everyday authority declines. As a political resource, it offers visibility and bargaining power in a competitive public sphere, a role very different from its earlier function as a moral regulator of daily life (Yadav, 1999) [34]. What emerges, then, is not the end of caste but its mutation. A system that once structured nearly every aspect of existence now works unevenly, strongly present in some domains and faint in others producing confusion about whether caste is gone or still here. Both impressions contain truth. The weakening of caste should therefore be understood not as disappearance but as a shift from total organization to partial influence, from explicit rules to implicit patterns, and from local enforcement to dispersed institutional effects. This shift reshapes inequality without resolving it leaving society with more movement but fewer shared guidelines, more competition but thinner support. That tension defines the present moment. And it explains why caste, even in weakened form, continues to matter, not as an open command but as a quiet force that shapes where people land long before outcomes are measured.

The Collapse of Traditional Moral Order and the Rise of Social Uncertainty

For much of Indian social history, caste worked less like a visible rulebook and more like an internal compass offering predictability in everyday life, setting moral expectations without constant negotiation and providing a form of social security that while deeply unequal, was stable enough to absorb tension and limit open conflict which is why its presence was often felt most clearly only when it began to loosen (Srinivas, 1962; Béteille, 1969) [6, 27]. Caste told people what kind of life was possible and what kind was not and in doing so it reduced uncertainty by narrowing choice. This narrowing mattered. It gave structure to ambition, shaped ideas of duty and linked individual behaviour to collective judgment in ways that made social life intelligible even when it was unjust. As this structure weakens, the effects are not simply liberating. They are unsettling. The erosion of caste-based moral order has produced a growing sense of identity anxiety especially among groups who experience greater exposure to competition without equal access to resources because when inherited boundaries fade without being replaced by shared norms, individuals are forced to define themselves repeatedly in unstable settings,

often without guidance about what counts as legitimate success or failure (Giddens, 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) [5, 20]. This uncertainty feeds moral confusion. Old rules lose authority yet new ones lack depth leaving people caught between inherited expectations and modern demands that pull in different directions. The result is not moral freedom but moral strain. Inter-group resentment grows in this space because competition intensifies at the same time that collective limits weaken encouraging people to read inequality as personal injustice or group betrayal rather than as a structural outcome which makes social boundaries more emotionally charged even as they appear formally open (Bauman, 2000) [4]. One short sentence says enough. Order weakens before equality arrives. As caste-based restraint fades, hyper-competitive individualism gains ground, driven by market logics that reward speed, visibility and accumulation while offering little guidance on restraint or responsibility pushing individuals to compete for space in education, employment and public recognition with few shared standards for fairness (Polanyi, 1944; Deshpande, 2017) [15, 25]. This competition does not remain confined to economic life. It spills into public culture where symbolic aggression becomes common, expressed through sharp language, performative outrage and identity-based assertions that seek recognition through volume rather than dialogue, a pattern that reflects deeper insecurity rather than confidence (Jaffrelot, 2003) [22]. Alongside this, nostalgia and revivalist movements gain appeal promising a return to moral clarity by invoking idealized pasts, whether religious, cultural or civilizational, even though these pasts were themselves structured by exclusion and hierarchy. This turn backward is not accidental. It reflects a search for certainty in a landscape where familiar reference points have dissolved faster than new ones can take root. Durkheim's concept of anomie provides a powerful way to understand this moment. Anomie describes a condition in which norms lose their hold, desires expand without limit and individuals struggle to align personal goals with collective expectations leading to frustration and instability rather than liberation (Durkheim, 1897/2002) [18]. Read through this lens, contemporary India shows many signs of an anomic transition where caste no longer regulates conduct with the force it once had but the institutions that replace it, such as markets, law and education, regulate behaviour only partially and often impersonally leaving moral questions unresolved. This produces a thin form of order. People follow rules but they do not always believe in them. They comply but they do not feel anchored. The weakening of caste thus removes a dense moral framework without supplying an equally shared alternative creating a vacuum that is filled unevenly by competition, resentment and symbolic assertion. Ambedkar's warning echoes here. He argued that dismantling caste without constructing a new social foundation would deepen disorder rather than end inequality because caste's power lay not only in oppression but in its ability to organize social life comprehensively (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. What is unfolding today reflects this insight. The loss of caste order without replacement does not simply expose injustice; it destabilizes everyday moral life leaving individuals to navigate contradictory demands from family, market, state and identity politics with little guidance on how to reconcile them. This condition produces movement without direction, choice without security and freedom shadowed by fear. The central argument, then, is not that caste should be defended as a moral system, but that its decline creates moral instability when no equally strong structure steps in to regulate expectations, restrain excess, and bind individuals to a shared sense of limits. That instability is now one of the defining features of contemporary Indian society shaping how people relate to work, politics and one another in ways that are often tense, fragmented, and uncertain.

How Does Society Survive Without Caste? Emerging Structures of Regulation and the Crisis of Belonging

When caste begins to lose its hold as an everyday system of regulation, society does not simply drift into disorder because social life rarely tolerates a vacuum for long; instead, new forms of regulation emerge unevenly and imperfectly attempting to perform some of the work that caste once handled almost automatically even though none of them fully replaces its depth or reach. One sentence makes this clear. Something steps in but nothing fully takes over. The market is often the first structure to be noticed in this transition. As economic life expands and occupational mobility increases, forms of advantage once tied to caste are gradually converted into class position, not through a dramatic break but through a slow translation of inherited resources into education, language skills, property and professional confidence allowing historically advantaged groups to move more smoothly into new economic spaces while presenting their success as the outcome of effort rather than background (Bourdieu, 1986; Deshpande, 2011) [11, 15]. This conversion matters because it reshapes inequality without erasing it. Entry into competition is formally open yet uneven in practice because those carrying accumulated social and cultural resources begin the race far ahead of others turning merit into a language that explains outcomes while hiding starting points. The result is a class system that appears modern but carries clear caste residues visible not in explicit exclusion but in patterned success and failure that follow familiar lines over time (Béteille, 1991) [7]. This shift creates a harsher moral climate. In caste society, inequality was justified through tradition; in market society, it is justified through performance which makes disadvantage feel personal and success feel deserved, even when structural gaps persist. That change deepens strain. Alongside the market, the modern state takes on a larger regulatory role replacing community-based norms with law, education systems, and administrative procedures that promise neutrality and fairness offering citizens rights rather than duties and rules rather than relationships (Weber, 1978) [30]. This transformation has expanded access in important ways especially through schooling and legal protection yet its limits are equally clear because impersonal regulation struggles to guide everyday moral life. Rules exist but they do not always settle disputes of meaning or belonging. Bureaucratic systems operate through documents, deadlines and procedures leaving little room for the dense social negotiation that caste once managed through custom and reputation. As a result, people continue to rely on informal connections to navigate institutions drawing on shared background, trust and familiarity to access opportunities and resolve problems that formal systems handle slowly or unevenly which allows old patterns of advantage to persist quietly within new structures (Jodhka, 2015) [23]. This coexistence of formal equality and informal dependence creates confusion rather than clarity. People are equal on

paper yet unequal in experience. Politics becomes another site where regulation reappears though in a different form. As caste weakens as a lived moral order, it re-emerges as a political symbol offering groups a language through which to demand recognition, representation and access to state resources transforming hierarchy into claims rather than obligations (Jaffrelot, 2003) [22]. This shift from ritual ranking to electoral mobilization stabilizes conflict at the level of competition rather than integration. Politics manages tension by channelling it into votes and representation but it does not rebuild shared moral life. Stability here is procedural not social. It prevents breakdown but it does not create cohesion. Together, these structures the market, the state and political competition allow society to survive without caste but only partially because they regulate behaviour without producing belonging, order without intimacy. This partial regulation sets the stage for a deeper transformation in the experience of selfhood. As caste recedes, identity shifts from being largely ascribed at birth to something that must be achieved, assembled and defended over time, a process that expands freedom while intensifying insecurity especially for younger generations navigating urban life, migration and digital environments where social cues are fluid and comparison is constant (Giddens, 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) [5, 20]. Choice increases but so does pressure. Individuals are told they can become anything yet they are given limited support to manage failure, uncertainty or delayed success. Digital selfhood amplifies this strain by turning identity into a performance measured through visibility, approval and speed, pulling individuals into continuous self-evaluation that leaves little space for rest or reflection. The psychological burden of self-construction grows heavier in this context because individuals must now explain both success and struggle in personal terms, even when outcomes remain shaped by structural conditions they did not choose. This burden is not evenly shared. Those with greater resources experience flexibility; others experience risk. Without strong welfare support to cushion transitions, individualization intensifies instability rather than empowerment producing anxiety, exhaustion and resentment rather than confidence (Bauman, 2000) [4]. Durkheim's insight returns here from another angle. When collective regulation weakens and individuals are left to manage social integration alone, strain follows, not because people resist freedom but because freedom without support becomes fragile (Durkheim, 1897/2002) [18]. In contemporary India, this fragility is visible in the uneven way people attach themselves to markets, institutions and political identities searching for anchors that can offer some sense of direction in a rapidly shifting landscape. Ambedkar's warning remains relevant in this setting as well. He argued that dismantling caste without constructing a new social foundation would not dissolve inequality but rearrange it, leaving society more mobile yet less secure, more open yet more tense (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. What emerges today confirms this view. Society survives without caste not by replacing it with a single coherent structure but by spreading regulation across markets, bureaucracies and political arenas, each of which performs part of the work while leaving significant gaps. These gaps are filled unevenly by informal ties, symbolic claims, personal struggle producing a social order that functions but feels unstable, flexible but exhausting. One final sentence captures the condition. Life moves, but it does not settle. The survival of society after caste, then, is real but it comes at the cost of deeper uncertainty because what once held people in place has been loosened without being replaced by a system capable of offering both fairness and belonging at the same time.

Is India Becoming a Casteless Society? The Post-Caste Condition

The idea that India is moving steadily toward a casteless society has gained wide circulation especially in public discourse shaped by urban experience, legal equality and the language of merit yet this claim becomes difficult to sustain once caste is examined not as a visible rule system but as a historical structure whose effects persist even after its authority weakens because social systems of this depth rarely disappear, they change form. The assumption of a casteless future rests on the belief that once ritual hierarchy, occupational inheritance and overt discrimination decline, caste itself loses relevance but this view confuses the fading of one mode of operation with the end of the structure as such. What is unfolding in India is better described as a post-caste condition, not a casteless one, where caste no longer organizes daily conduct in a direct way but continues to live on as memory, background, and identity shaping how people understand themselves and how others read them even when caste is not openly named. Memory matters here. Caste histories are carried through family narratives, community pride and inherited expectations creating a sense of continuity that survives institutional change which means that caste does not need to be enforced daily to remain socially effective. It lingers. This lingering presence explains why discrimination today is rarely loud yet remains patterned operating through institutions that claim neutrality while reproducing unequal outcomes whether in education, employment, housing or social recognition making inequality harder to contest because it no longer appears as deliberate exclusion but as the result of supposedly fair competition (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2017) [15, 28]. The language that legitimizes this condition is merit. Merit provides a moral explanation for unequal outcomes by framing success as earned and failure as personal, even when starting points remain deeply unequal, allowing caste-shaped advantage to be converted into achievement without appearing inherited, a process that closely resembles what Bourdieu described as the misrecognition of social capital as individual ability (Bourdieu, 1986) [11]. This shift does not remove caste; it sanitizes it. Inequality persists but its justification changes. In this sense post-caste India resembles neither traditional caste society nor a fully class-based order but something in between where older hierarchies survive inside modern institutions that claim to have transcended them. Comparison with Western class societies helps clarify this difference. In Europe and North America, class stratification developed largely around economic position and labour markets even though it later absorbed cultural and racial dimensions whereas caste in India began as a status system rooted in birth and social honour which means its residues cannot be erased simply by expanding markets or education (Weber, 1978; Dumont, 1970) [16, 30]. Western societies often present class mobility as the norm, even when mobility is limited in practice but caste carries a deeper symbolic weight tied to identity, belonging and moral worth making its afterlife more

complex. Race in the United States offers a closer parallel than class because it too persists as a structure even after formal equality is achieved shifting from overt segregation to institutional patterns that produce unequal outcomes while claiming neutrality (Pager & Shepherd, 2008) [24]. Yet even this comparison has limits because caste combines elements of status, culture and economy in ways that resist simple analogy. The result is not convergence with the West but the production of a hybrid structure unique to India's historical path where market competition, bureaucratic regulation, and democratic politics coexist with long memories of hierarchy and belonging. This hybridity explains why caste remains politically salient even as it weakens socially. In post-caste conditions, caste becomes a resource for recognition and representation rather than a guide for daily conduct allowing groups to mobilize around shared history and grievance while navigating institutions that officially deny caste relevance (Jaffrelot, 2003) [22]. Politics absorbs caste energy without resolving its social effects. Stability is achieved through representation, not integration. This distinction matters. A society can function politically while remaining socially fragmented and contemporary India increasingly shows this pattern. The rejection of the casteless future thesis, therefore, does not imply that caste will return to its old form or regain full authority but that its disappearance should not be assumed simply because its most visible features have declined. Caste has lost its ability to organize all of life yet it continues to shape who moves easily through institutions and who encounters resistance, who feels at home in public space and who remains alert, who carries confidence and who carries caution. These differences accumulate. Over time, they reproduce inequality in quieter ways. One short line captures the point. Decline is not disappearance. The post-caste condition is defined by this tension where caste is officially denied, morally disapproved and legally prohibited, yet socially remembered and structurally effective producing a form of inequality that is harder to name and therefore harder to challenge. Ambedkar anticipated this danger when he warned that dismantling caste rituals without transforming social structure would leave inequality intact while stripping society of the moral clarity that once made hierarchy visible and contestable (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) [2]. What emerges instead is a landscape of partial freedom and partial constraint where individuals are told they are equal while experiencing patterned difference, where society claims to have moved on while carrying its past forward in coded form. India, then, is not becoming casteless. It is becoming post-caste, a condition marked by muted hierarchy, institutionalized inequality and moral justification through merit producing a social order that looks modern on the surface yet remains deeply shaped by historical structure. This is not a path toward Western-style class society nor a simple continuation of caste tradition but a distinct hybrid formation unstable and uneven in which old hierarchies survive by learning how to speak the language of the new.

Comparative Perspective: Why Caste Cannot Simply Disappear

The expectation that caste will eventually disappear often rests on a misleading comparison with other societies where older forms of inequality appear to have weakened yet a closer look at how class operates in Europe and how race functions in the United States shows that deeply embedded systems of stratification rarely vanish; instead, they adapt, change their language and settle into new institutional forms that are less visible but no less effective (Weber, 1978; Tilly, 1998) [29, 30]. In much of Europe, class hierarchy was never formally abolished yet industrialization, welfare states and democratic politics were expected to soften its effects creating societies that appeared more fluid over time. What actually occurred was not the end of class but its mutation, as economic position became intertwined with education, cultural taste, neighbourhood and inherited advantage producing durable inequalities that survived even when overt class markers lost social legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe, 1987) [10, 21]. Class no longer announces itself loudly yet it continues to shape life chances through schooling, networks and cultural confidence allowing inequality to persist under the appearance of openness. This pattern matters for understanding caste because it shows how a system can lose its visible authority while retaining structural force. The American case of race offers an even closer parallel. Formal segregation ended decades ago, and legal equality is firmly established, yet racial inequality remains deeply entrenched through residential segregation, labour markets, policing, education and health outcomes, all operating through institutions that claim neutrality while reproducing patterned disadvantage (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Pager & Shepherd, 2008) [9, 24]. Race did not disappear when Jim Crow laws ended; it became institutional, coded and often denied shifting from explicit exclusion to what has been described as 'color-blind' inequality. This transformation did not weaken race as a social structure. It made it harder to confront. These comparative cases underline a basic sociological insight as when a system of inequality becomes deeply woven into everyday practice, institutions, and moral reasoning, it does not collapse simply because it is criticized or legally restricted. It mutates. Caste fits this pattern closely. Like class and race, caste has functioned over centuries as a system that organizes access to resources, dignity and belonging embedding itself so deeply that its effects outlive the rules that once made it visible. This is why treating caste as a removable tradition rather than a long-term structural arrangement leads to analytical error. Caste is better understood as India's equivalent of a durable inequality system, comparable in depth, though not in form, to class in Europe and race in the United States. Each of these systems developed under different historical conditions yet they share a common feature like they attach inequality to identities that feel natural, inherited and difficult to escape making disadvantage appear normal rather than imposed. The persistence of such systems lies in their ability to transform without losing their core function. Caste once relied on ritual hierarchy, occupational fixation, and overt social distance; as these weaken, caste reorganizes itself around education, market success, political recognition and institutional access producing continuity through change rather than collapse. One short line explains this. Structure survives by learning new languages. Weber's concept of social closure helps explain why this survival is possible because closure does not require visible barriers once advantage has been institutionalized; it works through exclusion that appears routine, justified and even fair over time. Bourdieu's work adds another layer by showing how inherited cultural resources are misrecognized as individual

ability, allowing inequality to persist while appearing legitimate, a mechanism that operates as clearly in caste-shaped India as it does in class-based Europe (Bourdieu, 1986) [11]. What distinguishes caste is not that it is uniquely rigid but that its historical reach was unusually comprehensive, touching work, marriage, morality and everyday interaction at once which means its decline leaves behind a larger vacuum than the decline of systems that were narrower in scope. This vacuum does not erase caste effects; it redistributes them across institutions that lack the moral density to manage inequality openly. The result is persistence through transformation. Caste no longer governs daily conduct with the authority it once held yet it continues to shape patterns of advantage and disadvantage through indirect routes much like race in the United States or class in Europe. The key insight, then, is that the disappearance of overt caste practices should not be mistaken for structural dissolution. History suggests the opposite. Systems of stratification that last long enough to shape habits, institutions and moral reasoning do not vanish; they evolve. They move from being named to being denied from being enforced to being explained away, from being justified by tradition to being justified by merit. India's experience fits squarely within this broader comparative pattern. Caste is not an exception to sociological theory; it confirms it. The post-caste condition, therefore, should be understood not as a transitional stage on the way to equality but as a stable, if uneasy, form in which old hierarchies continue to operate under new rules. This does not mean that change is impossible, but it does mean that change is slower, more uneven, and more contested than the casteless future thesis allows. Decline is real. Disappearance is not. The deeper lesson drawn from comparative sociology is clear that long-term inequality structures persist precisely because they adapt, and caste, like class and race, survives not by remaining the same but by becoming something that looks different while doing much of the same work.

Conclusion

This paper began with a simple but uncomfortable claim that the weakening of caste does not automatically lead to equality nor does it bring social harmony by default. What it brings first is transition. That transition is uneven, tense and often confusing. Caste once held Indian society together through a dense web of expectations, limits and shared understandings, and although that web was deeply unequal, it gave people a sense of where they stood and what could be expected of them. As that structure loosens, society does not move smoothly toward freedom; it moves into uncertainty. New forms of hierarchy appear, older ones adapt, and inequality finds quieter ways to persist. The decline of caste, then, is not a clean break with the past but a reworking of it. Throughout the discussion, caste has been treated not simply as a cultural tradition or a moral failure but as a system of regulation. It organized social life at many levels at once, linking identity to work, morality to belonging and personal conduct to collective judgment. When such a system weakens, the loss is not only of hierarchy but of order. This is why the effects of caste decline are felt far beyond ritual or religious life. They appear in competition that feels harsher than before, in anxiety about belonging and in public cultures that swing between aggression and nostalgia. These are not signs of a society becoming free; they are signs of a society searching for new anchors. India's central challenge today lies in this search. Markets regulate through competition but offer little moral guidance. The state regulates through law and procedure but struggles to create shared meaning or trust. Politics manages conflict through representation but rarely produces social integration. None of these structures carries the depth or reach that caste once had, and none has yet developed the capacity to restrain inequality while also offering dignity and belonging. As a result, regulation is spread across institutions that do not speak the same moral language leaving individuals to navigate conflicting demands with limited support. The outcome is not collapse but fragility. The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in reframing the debate around caste decline. Rather than treating the weakening of caste as liberation alone, it has been approached as a regulatory crisis. This shift in framing matters. It helps explain why inequality can persist even as caste rules fade and why social life can feel more unstable even as formal freedoms expand. Classical social theory reminds us that social order depends not only on rules but on shared moral limits that make those rules meaningful. When such limits weaken without replacement, societies do not simply become more open; they become more strained. Seen in this light, post-caste India is not an unfinished version of a Western class society nor a delayed continuation of tradition but a distinct formation shaped by the tension between historical structure and modern change. The final reflection returns to the question that runs through this study. The central problem of contemporary Indian society is not merely the survival of caste but the uncertainty of what can replace it as a stable source of social order, moral regulation and collective meaning. Until a structure emerges that can combine fairness with restraint, openness with security and freedom with belonging, the decline of caste will continue to produce movement without settlement. Society will function. People will adapt. But stability will remain fragile. The future of post-traditional India depends less on whether caste disappears and more on whether a new moral framework can take its place without reproducing the inequalities it seeks to overcome.

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