

AN INSTITUTIONALIST ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA¹

by

Elisabetta Basile

Professor of Development Economics

Department of Economics and Law, University of Rome La Sapienza

elisabetta.basile@uniroma1.it

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of caste in contemporary India. My aim is two-fold: first, I show that, despite the formal abolition of caste in the Indian constitution, caste continues to exercise a key influence on individual and social behaviour in India and is still one of the main organising principles of Indian society; and second, I put forward an interpretative hypothesis on the role played by caste which keeps into account the changes in Indian society brought about by the capitalist transformation of the country and by the new political connotation gained by caste following the implementation of the expanded Reservation Policy for backward castes and classes.

To this aim, I present an institutionalist analysis of caste which is carried out both in theoretical and empirical terms. Engaging with the conventional Marxist view of caste as a ‘false consciousness’, caste is conceptualised as both an *institution* and an *ideology*, which influences mental processes and social relations and, at the same time, defines widely accepted patterns of civil society organisation. The conceptual background is Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, while the role of caste is assessed through the analysis of its impact on the organisation of civil society. The two-fold role of caste as an institution and an ideology is empirically examined in the case of Arni, a small-size market town located in Northern Tamil Nadu, which has experienced a major socio-economic change after the introduction of the Green Revolution in the 1970s.

The paper is organised as follows. After introducing Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemony in civil society in section 2, section 3 develops the two-fold role of caste as an institution and as an ideology, relying on the evidence and argument provided by the literature on contemporary India. Section 4 summarises the results of a survey of Arni’s

¹ This paper builds on the theoretical and empirical analysis of caste presented in my book *Capitalist Development in India’s Informal Economy* (Routledge, 2013).

civil society exploring the economic impacts of social organisation. Section 5 comments on the role of caste in Arni's civil society.

2. Gramsci's theory of hegemony in civil society

The political thought of Antonio Gramsci has a key role in the development of historical materialism in the 20th century. Challenging Marx's view that structure has a primacy over superstructure, Gramsci argues that capitalist development cannot be explained only by the change in production relations. In an innovative analysis of the relations between structure and superstructure, he shows that the ideas and concepts driving human agency are an outcome of social relations and in turn exert a key impact on economic organisation.

This innovative view of the relations of structure and superstructure is contained in Gramsci's theory of hegemony in civil society. I review this theory for it provides the conceptual framework in which I contextualise my institutionalist analysis of caste in contemporary India.

Civil society

In *Quaderni del carcere* (Prison Notebooks) Gramsci presents a view of civil society that differs markedly from Marx's. Following Hegel, Gramsci focuses on the *association* as the 'constituent element' of civil society (Gramsci, 1975: 703) and identifies the key aim of associations as being the representation and administration of private interests². Yet, Gramsci's view differs from Hegel's: for Gramsci, the private interests that are represented and administered in civil society are not only economic as Hegel suggests; on the contrary, associations are an outcome of both economic and non-economic interests and ideas. Thus, Gramsci's civil society contains relations and institutions which emerge from social relations in all spheres of human life. Yet for Gramsci, civil society is distinct from the state and – with the state – is located in the superstructure.³ Here is the major discrepancy with Marx's theory in which the state is located in the structure (Bobbio, 1979). The two 'layers' constituting the superstructure differ in the ways in which class relations are regulated and class conflicts are handled.

² Associations are 'the private texture of the state' (Gramsci, 1975: 57).

³ 'We can for the moment fix two major superstructural layers: the one that can be called "civil society", that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private", and that of "political society" or "the State"' (Gramsci, 1975: 1518).

Gramsci explains this difference by means of the concept of hegemony (Texier, 1979).

Hegemony

Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* refers to an original idea of dominance that is specific to civil society but distinct from state dominance. For Gramsci (as for Marx), the power of the ruling classes in the capitalist economy has an economic basis, which is found in the control of the means of production. Yet, for Gramsci, the dominance of the ruling classes over the subordinated classes takes economic and non-economic forms, since it also includes political, moral and intellectual leadership. Gramsci calls this complex form of dominance *hegemony* and refers to the ruling classes as *hegemonic classes* and to the dominated classes as *subaltern classes*.

The hegemonic classes keep their leadership over subaltern classes by means of *ideology*: a system of beliefs, values and symbols that express particularist interests. Ideology is a tool to ensure the 'spontaneous' consensus of the subaltern classes on the power of the hegemonic classes, caused in turn 'by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production' (Gramsci, 1975: p. 1519).

While ideology reduces the need for coercion, coercion is not always excluded; and elite hegemony may also require the use of corruption and fraud. These stand 'in between consensus and force' when the exercise of cultural and moral leadership is difficult and the use of force dangerous (Gramsci, 1975: 1638).

While the state is the realm of force, civil society is the realm of ideology.

Hegemony and Ideology

The construction of hegemony by means of ideology is a complex process. Consensus requires the assimilation of the moral beliefs and values of the hegemonic classes by subaltern classes. It is a 'pedagogical' process in which subaltern classes are led throughout by the hegemonic elites (Gramsci, 1975: 1331) and hegemonic classes take into account the needs of minority groups, renegotiating and combining them with their own interests. The merging of interests is carried out by building a network of alliances between subaltern and hegemonic classes in the form of 'voluntary' associations⁴ forming the institutional framework of civil society with consensus ensured by

⁴ I.e. associations in which each individual enters on a 'voluntary' basis.

ideology.

Civil society associations are historical outcomes of underlying interests imposed ideologically on society. State and civil society both result from specific production relations, both represent the interests of the dominant classes; and both require constant negotiation over conflicting interests.

Corporatism

Gramsci's concept of civil society as an 'association of associations' representing and administering particularistic interests appears to be an 'institutional structure' consistent with the concept of corporatism (Schmitter, 1974).⁵ In the civil society theorised by Gramsci interest representation is organised by means of a limited number of associations which are interest groups regulating social relations at all levels – those among groups, and those between groups and the state. Gramsci's main empirical reference is Fascist Italy, which provided a paradigmatic example of the relations between hegemony and ideology in civil society. In Italian corporatism the institutional structure of organised interests was imposed by the state⁶ and rested on three pillars: the Fascist party, the trade unions and the guilds (*corporazioni*). Workers' participation in the guilds was compulsory so as to de-legitimate class struggle through workers being forced into the regulation of the economy.⁷

The ideology of *Homo Corporativus* supported the corporatist project, presenting it as a 'third way' alternative to capitalism and to socialism, leading to the 'modernisation' of the country in the fight against rent and other parasitic burdens.

⁵ 'Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.' (Schmitter, 1974: p. 93-94). Corporatism has been contrasted with pluralism. 'Pluralism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituents units are organised into an unspecified number of multiple, voluntary, competitive, non-hierarchically ordered and self-determined (as to the type or scope of interest) categories which are not specifically licensed, recognised, subsidized, created, otherwise controlled in leadership selection or interest articulation by the state and which do not exercise a monopoly of representational activity within their respective categories.' (Schmitter, 1974: p. 96).

⁶ It was then a form of *state corporatism*, a situation which differs from *societal corporatism*, i.e. when the pressure for interest representation and organisation in association emerges from society (Cawson, 1985).

⁷ The ideological basis for a Fascist corporatist society was an *ad hoc* economic theory based on the concept of *Homo Corporativus*, according to which there were no divergences or contrasts between individual and social interests (Cavaliere, 1994).

3. Caste as an institution and an ideology

With its focus on ideology, Gramsci's theory of hegemony defines the broad conceptual framework to introduce my institutionalist hypothesis on the role of caste in contemporary India. This hypothesis is introduced in this section by means of a review of literature and then will be explored empirically in section 4.

Caste in independent India

Caste is a form of social stratification based on a concept of inequality that finds its legitimacy in Hindu religion and culture. It defines a *closed* and *segmented* system of stratification in which individual mobility is denied, caste groups recognise the hierarchy and accept their position in it by force of religious legitimacy (Deshpande, 2003: 103).

Caste has worked both as a form of social stratification and as an ideology. Focusing on social stratification, the late M.N. Srinivas (1996) takes the social order of caste as the origin of power structures and relations influencing economy and polity. Focusing on ideology, the classical Marxist analysis considers caste as 'false consciousness' (Shah, 2002). An alternative Marxist view of caste sees caste as the form taken by class in India (Chakrabarti and Cullenberg, 2003: 114-115).

For several decades after the formal abolition of caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution, caste was a non-issue. In academic and political circles the dominant view was that the 'modernisation' of the country would lead to the dissolution of caste, so supporting the democratic development of the country. Yet, the Mandal Commission (1979) and the subsequent Mandal Report (1980 but not implemented until the 1990s) steered Indian history differently, re-inventing caste as a 'modern institution' (Deshpande, 2003: 124).⁸

The measures modifying India's Reservation Policy for the backward and most

⁸ The Mandal Commission was set up in 1979 in order to actuate the constitutional provisions for reservation: a 'package of protective, preferential and developmental practices' in favour of the less advanced groups of Indian society. The Mandal Report was submitted in December 1980, suggesting a number of reservation measures for the backward and most-backward castes and classes, including Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Tribes (STs) – the communities outside the Hindu caste system, which have been subject to extensive social disadvantage and discrimination – and the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) – i.e. the lower Hindu castes. The implementation of the measures suggested by the Mandal Report started only in August 1990 (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 203).

backward castes confirmed a process of institutional change that led, on the one hand, to the secularisation of caste and, on the other, to the emergence of new economic and political roles for it. These changes were the outcome of several intertwined processes.

One important element has been suggested to be rural–urban (and international) *migration* which breaks the territorial boundaries of sub-castes, generating larger caste groupings. This process is reinforced by two other elements: *caste mobility* and *in-caste class differentiation* (Sharma, 1994: 7-8). A major outcome is the increasing separation between caste and occupation (Béteille, 2007: 951).

Identity is the tool through which castes react to threats to their unity and boundaries. Caste identities are socially constructed, and their construction undermines caste hierarchy. Often without the support of textual tradition, caste histories are invented, and qualities and skills specific to each caste are celebrated (Narayan, 2004a). This ‘rhetoric’ of caste is elaborated and locally disseminated through caste associations (Michelutti, 2004). While the construction of a ‘suitable’ past for castes is not a new phenomenon, neglected and undervalued practices are re-discovered and enhanced (Michelutti, 2004: 49; Gupta, 2004: xix). So, while the Mandal Report accelerates the death of caste as a *system*, it also enhances the assertion of caste *identity* leading to the emergence of caste politics (Shah, 2007).

The politicisation of caste identity and the use of caste as a vehicle to represent and to organise interests in the party political arena is a major trait of the post-Mandal era. Following the emergence of new caste interests generated by the Reservation Policy, castes behave as pressure groups, organising interests by means of caste associations and political associations, and even caste-based parties (Harriss-White, 2003: 194-196; Bhanu Mehta, 2004; Narayan, 2004a and 2004b; Michelutti, 2004).

Caste and class

The role of caste politics as an instrument of democratic politics, in particular for the representation of lower castes, is controversial (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Narayan, 2004b; Béteille, 2007; Wankhede, 2008; Desai and Dubey, 2011). In broad terms, the controversy refers to the nature of caste/class relations and to the influence on them of Reservation Policy.

True, caste and class are different forms of social stratification. However, as caste classifications also rely on occupational status, caste inequalities have often been

analysed in terms of class while hierarchies of landownership and hierarchies of caste often overlap (Shah, 2002).⁹ Deshpande (2003: 109-120) shows that caste divisions continue to be expressed through income and wealth, while Vaid (2007) shows that high castes dominate the professional, business and large farming classes.

Moreover, there is abundant evidence that caste discrimination is a form of ‘forced’ social exclusion which restricts the access to capital, labour, land, education, and other inputs to low-caste individuals, and thereby denying rights and preventing their mobility on the class ladder (Thorat and Newman, 2007: 4122). This leads to inefficiency in resource allocation and to the perpetuation of the class subordination of the lower castes, as shown by the segregation of lower castes to the low quality/low paid jobs in the labour market (Madheswaran and Attewell, 2007; Srinivasan, here). Finally, the joint action of class and caste accentuates the segmentation of informal and rural workers, consigning them to the bottom of Indian labour hierarchy (Harriss-White, 2003; Heyer, 2010; Lerche, 2010; Basile, 2013). In post-Mandal India caste is a tool in the hands of the hegemonic classes, creating a favourable environment for the marginalisation and exploitation of the lower castes/classes.

While the conceptual difference between caste and class stratification cannot be denied, caste and class intertwine in a nexus that provides a major key to the role of caste in contemporary India.

The literature shows that the intertwining of class and caste takes two forms: i) the use of caste ideology to control class conflict and pursue the interests of the hegemonic classes; and ii) the creation of caste-based institutions to support the hegemony of capitalist classes.

On the one side, caste prevents the formation of class-consciousness. It substitutes caste consciousness for class-consciousness, leading the exploited classes to absorb – and become committed to – values and interests of the dominating classes. Caste values and interests contrast with class values and interests: if the latter mobilise the exploited classes against the exploiting classes, enhancing class conflicts, the former prevent class conflicts why members of the exploited classes do not perceive their exploitation. On the other side, caste creates non-class institutions – caste associations and caste-based associations – that represent and organise particularistic interests vested in caste

⁹ Socio-anthropological research has shown that the origin of caste is associated with the production of an economic surplus, caste being a tool ‘to accommodate’ the inequalities generated by the surplus itself.

identity, so breaking the unity of the exploited classes by dividing them according to their caste (Bhambhri, 2005). This action assists in constraining class-consciousness, slowing down class unity.

Caste also impacts on class through the formation of new classes across the caste hierarchy. This process, that Sheth (1999: 2508) calls the ‘classisation of caste’, is shown in particular by the emergence of the new ‘middle class’ that is the outcome of inter-caste mobility and in-caste class differentiation (Béteille, 2007). The new middle class is a composite stratum that includes members of several castes and class fractions which share lifestyles and the self-consciousness derived from income class (Sheth, 1999: 2508-9; Varma, 1998).

While including several castes and class fractions, the new middle class is rapidly acquiring a specific self-identity: members share interests and lifestyles with other members of the class rather than with individuals of the same caste, becoming progressively more distant from the rituals specific to their caste (Sheth, 1999).

The new class formation does not require the dissolution of individual caste identities. Caste still provides the cultural background of social and political life: ‘identity politics [i.e. caste politics] has come to prevail over class politics’ (Béteille, 2007: 951), and caste-based associations and parties represent the main means to organise and represent interests.

An institutionalist conceptualisation of caste

In contemporary India caste is both an *ideology* and an *institution*. As a system of values and beliefs, caste is part of the mental processes that shape human agency, influencing social interaction. As an institution – transforming ideas into social norms – caste defines widely accepted patterns in organised civil society. Relying on these roles, it continues to be a major organising principle of India’s society.

As an institution, caste has evolved to provide a major vehicle for the representation and organisation of particularistic (class and non-class) interests emerging in economy and polity. Also as an ideology, caste has undergone a deep change since Independence, progressively weakening its religious character to gain instead a political connotation.

Caste is much more than a ‘false consciousness’ that undermines the unity of the working classes. It is a major force in civil society’s organisation in which ideology ‘materialises’. Reading it through the lens of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, this two-

fold nature corresponds to a two-fold role: i) as ideology, caste ensures through caste idioms and symbols that the hegemony of the elites is accepted by subaltern classes; ii) as civil society, caste produces a network of associations in which subaltern and dominant classes participate ‘voluntarily’, and in which the necessary hegemonic consensus is negotiated. Both the ideology and the civil society that the ideology produces are the outcome of social production relations. While ideology ensures that dominant classes also have ‘moral and intellectual leadership’ over subaltern classes, this dominance is rooted in the structure of the economy.

4. Caste and production relations in Arni’s civil society

In this section, I examine the hypothesis about the role of caste as an institution and an ideology using the case of Arni, a market-town locate in a rural district in Tamil Nadu which has undergone a major process of socio-economic change after the introduction of high-yield varieties in agriculture at the end of the 1960s. The analysis relies on a survey of Arni’s civil society carried out in the late 1990s. The survey was based on a questionnaire submitted to all the associations in the town asking current office bearers about their history, purposes and activities.¹⁰ Consistently with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, civil society was taken as the sphere in which class and non-class interests are expressed and represented, exerting an influence on production relations and being influenced by them. The survey’s aims were two-fold: i) to understand whether or not the institutions were playing a regulatory function; and ii) to assess the degree of voluntariness of membership in order to establish to what extent social interactions were producing a form of corporatist civil society.

To translate the Gramscian framework to empirical terms, production relations were deconstructed to single out vital points at which the impact of organised civil society might be significant. Three phases were identified in the production process: the purchase of the means of production and labour power, the organisation of production, and the marketing of output. The analysis focused on four categories of relationships in which conflicting interests emerge and social regulation is necessary: economy/state; economy/society; within capital; capital/labour.

¹⁰ Detailed information on Arni’s economy and society is found in Basile (2013: Ch. 6). The survey on Arni’s civil society is presented in Basile (2013: Ch. 8).

Detailed information was collected on: i) the nature of associations (aim, criterion for membership, action); ii) the presence and role of the state in the sector concerned; iii) market structure and relations among sectors; vi) the social embeddedness of capital accumulation in the sector with specific reference to the role of family, religion and caste.

Altogether, I interviewed: i) 32 business and professional associations, with an estimated coverage of approximately 2,000 people; ii) 23 cultural and religious associations, of which 15 are caste associations. This category also includes a consumer association and 7 philanthropic associations, and covers more than 35,000 people; iii) 11 unions, covering less than 2,000 people. The total number of people indirectly covered by this set of associations is of the order of 40-45,000, but this is a rough estimate, due to double-counting in organisations of caste and of trade.

Arni's civil society

The survey confirmed the existence in Arni of a comprehensive associational order strictly linked to the structure of the economy. Civil society includes associations of individuals involved in the production of goods (in particular silk and rice) and services. It also stresses the presence of the state in Arni's economy, as suggested by 5 unions of public sector workers. A significant presence was also found of caste associations and of a heterogeneous group of associations – 'welfare' associations – whose aims are oriented to the entire town's corporate interests, rather than to individual or group interests.

In exploring the nature and function of organised civil society, I focus on the forms of individual participation in civil society and on the impact of the associational order on economic performance. So the associations are first classified in relation to the 'voluntariness' of participation and to their impact on growth and stability; then, the interviews are analysed focusing on the economic relations in which conflicting interests emerge and social regulation is necessary (see Tables 1 and 2).

Four degrees of voluntariness of membership have been defined:

1. Voluntary membership: when at least one of the following conditions is satisfied: i) the number of participants is 'small' in comparison to the potential members; ii) non-membership excludes a person only from the association's activity; iii) other similar associations exist.

2. Exclusive but voluntary membership: when all the following conditions are satisfied: i) not all the potential members are actual members; ii) other similar associations do not exist; iii) non-membership 'excludes' a person only from one specific segment of the relevant market or from some benefit.

3. Quasi-voluntary membership by profession: membership is formally voluntary but the status of non-member excludes them from the profession. It is identified by: i) the absence of other similar associations; and ii) membership spread to all the individuals in the profession.

4. Quasi-voluntary membership by birth: this category obviously includes caste associations, but also the professional associations organising individuals from a specific caste.

The associations are also classified on the basis of two complementary criteria: i) their influence on economic growth and ii) their influence on social stability. Each association was asked to provide details about its involvement in the economic process and its impact on the access to the means of production, on the organisation of the production process and on the disposal/marketing of output. Then, each association was assessed for its impact on social stability by information about relations (and conflicts) between capital and labour, capital and state, labour and state, within capital, and economy and society.

The information coming from the previous two classifications is presented in a compact form in Table 3.

State and economy

The survey shows the presence of the state in Arni's economy at four main levels. First, the state manages activities that are relevant for the economy and society: it directly provides and regulates public services, such as banks and post-office, hospitals and schools, and supplies goods and infrastructural services, such as food and electricity. Moreover, it participates in the building of the economic infrastructure of the town, representing a major component of effective demand. This aspect clearly emerges from the vast majority of reports from business associations, which emphasise the importance of orders from public sector institutions for items such as books, uniforms, building materials, housing etc.

Second, the state formally defines the regulative framework of aspects of 'informal'

economic life. It concedes licences to trade and to use public land, and collects fiscal revenue and levies, albeit in a fashion challenged by avoidance and evasion. Third, private citizens and members of the organisations frequently enter into conflicting or collusive contact with the police.

Fourth, the major concern of the associations is to find ways to direct their relations with the public authorities along mutually satisfactory lines. Despite the fact that the declared aim of the associations is to promote the ‘welfare’ or the ‘interest’ of the members, their actual aim is to limit the intrusiveness of the state in their field and to lobby for the interest of the associations. In other terms, their function is to make political exchanges with the state – i.e. to bargain over state actions and state influence on the economy – in order to define the terms of the relationships between state/economy/society. Corruption is a central ingredient of this political exchange.

Economic interests

The core activities of the town are regulated by a strict associational order. So, for example, the Paddy and Rice Mills’ Association dominates the rice sector by regulating the relationships among members as far as problems with labour and weights are concerned. Employer/employee relations are also managed by individual rice firms and controlled directly by the owners/entrepreneurs. Similarly, the Silk Twisters’ Association participates in the regulation of the silk sector informing members about cases of misbehaviour of workers in order to organise collective punishment.¹¹ By contrast, the major aim of the Tamil Nadu Gold and Silver Merchants’ Federation is the internal control of the profession. This takes the form of quasi-voluntary membership: a necessary condition to enter the profession is to be a member, while members are obliged to accept the rules decided by the association.

The associational order also impacts on the phases of the production process. There are associations that dominate segments of the private credit system (i.e. the Association of Pawnbrokers) and regulate the link between official and unofficial sources of financing. Some associations keep strong control over information about the channels for loans from private sources, while in other cases – as for instance with the Grocery Merchants Association – credit is internally organised to allow members to ‘purchase commodities

¹¹ It must be emphasised that the silk sector is regulated by three main associations: The Arni Silk Merchants Association, the Tiruvannamalai District Handloom Silk Designers Association and the Silk Twisters Associations.

... without interest’.

Associations also play a major role for the education, training and enrolment of workers. This is particularly evident in the case of caste associations when they organise individuals working in the same profession, such as the Barbers’ Association and the Weavers’ Association, but it is also common for other business associations that examine the family background of workers and their caste at the moment of enrolment. Caste associations – for instance The Tamil Nadu Karneegar Sangam (for accountants) – also provide the members ‘counselling for getting education’, while other associations – for instance the Arni Washermen’s Union (a caste-based association) – have the main aim to ‘see that washermen are employed on a regular basis’.

Finally, the organisational structure defines hours of the working day for each category of workers, and may influence prices and wages. For instance, the Tamil Nadu Association of Shaving Saloons and the Arni Electricians’ Sangam fix the rate for the services provided by the members. Similarly, the Arni Silk Merchants Association controls the biennial revision of weavers’ wages and exerts a pressure ‘on government to provide insurance cover to weavers’. Likewise, the Tiruvannamalai District Handloom Silk Designer Association reports that – before the starting of the association – design workers were getting unsatisfactory remuneration, a problem that the association has solved. By contrast, the Grocery Merchants Association, while not setting the prices, collects the information on the basis of which prices are determined, while the Arni Area Car and Van Drivers Welfare Association ensures that the members are regularly paid their wages. Finally, the powerful Paddy and Rice Merchants Association, denouncing the widespread risk of corruption and fraud, emphasises the necessity to define a common policy and practice for members in relation to the measures to be used in transactions.

Associations are usually in charge of the representation of members’ interests. Yet, their regulatory function clearly emerges from the interviews. This is the case of the Association for the Progress of Tailors that i) issues identity cards to regulate the participation of members, ii) divides ‘the work (from public orders) among the members’ in order ‘to benefit many families economically’, iii) provides assistance in order to get credit, and iv) ensures members’ protection in case of conflicts with the employers (‘many tailors who are not members of the Association are removed with impunity by employers’). Similar cases include that of the Valumpuri Vinayakar

Rickshaw Pullers Association, that has the main aim of defining an ‘informal code of conduct’ for members, and of the Arni Auto Owners and Drivers Association which sets the prices for the services provided by members and, at the same time, protects members in case of accidents and disputes. The regulatory role is also stressed by the Porters’ Association (a caste-based association) which protects members’ interests in the labour market. Similarly, the Soda Factory Association argues that ‘a new shop has to be started only with the consent of the Association which would create otherwise problems for the person starting it’. Also the Tamil Nadu Gold and Silver Jewellery Merchants Federation regulates the activity, warning its members about the risk of purchasing stolen jewels, while the Arni Pawnbrokers Association has the aim to ensure that members are ‘licence holders’. Another major example of the regulatory function is provided by the Chamber of Commerce, which explicitly aims at controlling competition in order to keep prices and profits at a reasonable level for Arni’s business economy as a whole.

The role of labour unions is mainly confined to the public sector. Four main associations ‘protect’ the interests of public workers. This is the case, in particular, of the National Federation of Postal Employees which has the aim to ‘fight against the punishment imposed by the superior authorities’ and for ‘pay rise’. It also exerts a pressure for ‘the implementation of all the benefits and privileges given by the government’. The central and local state is also the counterpart of the other three public sector unions – the Sanitary Workers Sangam, Nursery School Sangam, and School Teachers Federation – which share the common aim of protecting the workers and their sectors of activity from corruption and interference of state officials.

In addition to these, the Dr. Ambedkar Transport Workers’ Union should also be mentioned as a particular type of trade union that groups mainly (but not only) Scheduled Castes (SC) workers who are employed by the Transport Service (government-owned). The aim of this union is to support the rights of SC transport workers against any kind of negative discrimination, in particular when a worker is considered ‘undesirable’ and there is the risk of dismissal. Finally, there is the Electricity Board Union which has among its aims, to ensure ‘the security for workers and for society’, to ‘influence policy formation regarding wages’, and to ‘advise the government on policy’.

Economy and society

Hindus, Jains, Christians, Muslims all live together in the town and participate in civil society associations. This applies in particular (but not only) to business and professional associations (other than those that are caste-based) which, by claiming to be 'open' to members from all castes, and to Muslims and Christians, assert a secular pluralistic identity. In some important associations Muslim individuals occupy the top positions. This happened in the case of leading economic associations, such as the Arni Chamber of Commerce, the Jewellery Association and the Clothing Merchants' association.

Yet caste representation in formal caste associations is strong. The representation of SCs (about 15 percent of Arni's population) is not entrusted to one caste association, but is segmented into a number of small business and professional associations, unions, and political parties. These forms of 'organisational' representation have two major aspects in common: they lobby to defend their members politically and economically, and they bargain with the state for the implementation of the Reservation Policy, i.e. for the positive discrimination in terms of employment opportunities and other benefits.

Small business associations aim to keep under control the internal level of conflicts, providing a sort of behavioural code that guides members. As reported in interview, the Arni Town Fruit Merchants' Sangam, in which more than 90 percent of the members are SCs, has been formed in order to protect members from the police. Also the Rickshaw Pulling Association shares the aim to 'protect members from the harassment by the police'; yet, it also lobbies in order to ensure that the Municipality gives 'legal recognition to the rickshaw stand' and defines a behaviour code for community members who 'should not work when under the influence of drugs, not indulge in gambling, not speak to customers'. The Sanitary Workers' Sangam – a scheduled-caste-based trade union – declares the aim of protecting members from government's 'scant regard to views of workers' and of monitoring the organisation of work in order to avoid sexual discrimination.

This double level of action – external, in relation to the state and other castes, and internal, directed to the self-regulation of castes – is also to be found in the organisations that represent the interests of Most Backward Castes (MBCs): all together four registered commodity associations, four unregistered groups, four caste associations and a caste-based group, the Pattali Makkal Katchi, recently transformed into a political party. As far as the professional associations are concerned (in particular

Barbers' and Washermen's), the self-regulatory role consists in defining the relevant prices and the working conditions, while the main issue involves lobbying to obtain SC status (and positive discrimination).

This is also the case of the Tamil Nadu Association of Shaving Saloons – grouping individuals from the Tamil Barber Caste – which has the main aim of 'fixing the rates (for labour) for each type of facility provided'. Moreover, the Association also 'takes up the cases [of members] and represents [them] to the government'. Similarly, the Arni Washermen's Union has the declared aim of lobbying for the MBC status, while, at the same time, it bargains with the local government to ensure that washermen 'are appointed on a regular basis [as staff] in the hospital', while the Arni Town Vanniar Association declares the broader aim of lobbying to get from the government 'subsidies for agricultural inputs, higher prices for agricultural products, and reduction in price for the essential commodities'.

The Backward Castes (BC) constitute a most heterogeneous category, in which the core of Arni business (silk and gold) is included together with unskilled workers who live in poverty. In this caste category, we observe at work contradictory processes, such as the imitation of life styles and food consumption patterns of the Forward Castes (FCs), and the claiming for the MBC status in order to obtain economic advantages from the state.

The interviews reported several cases of caste associations lobbying for MBC status. Thus, while the Naidu Association of Arni unites individuals from the *Naidu* caste with the general aim 'to strive towards the security of members', it includes among its actions also placing pressure on the government to 'reclassify the community from present BC status to the MBC category (so that they can enjoy more specific reservation quotas)'. A similar action is also reported by the Tamil Nadu *Karneegar* Sangam, the Tiruvannamalai District *Vanniar* Sangam, the *Yadava* Sangam, and the Arni *Kannada Veera Saiva Jainkeekar* Sangam.

By contrast other examples exist – such as that of the Tamil Nadu Jewel Workers Central Sangam (Arni Branch), which organises goldsmiths – in which the activity is mainly aimed at the internal regulation of businesses and the protection of members in trouble with the police; while the Arni Town *Sengunthar* Sangam mainly works on social welfare in order to 'improve the conditions of the community' providing 'free tuition to children' and 'aid to poor families'.

The aim of protecting the community in its relations with the local and central governments and to regulate internal relations is also observed in the case of FC civil society. Here, again, the claiming of BC status is a common practice in the political exchange with local and central authorities and is an ideologically unifying aspiration for the various communities.

Caste associations exhibit two fields of action: an internal field, with the aim of self-regulation, and an external field, with the aim of lobbying and bargaining with the state to obtain advantages. So, the Tamil Nadu *Brahmin's* Sangam (Arni Branch) – which organises all Brahmin castes in the town – denounces the widespread feeling of ‘depression and oppression’ of its members due to the increasing difficulty in getting government employment, as a consequence of the Reservation Policy; this situation contrasts with the high level of education of the community in which more than 60 percent of the members reach the level of secondary school and about 30 percent achieve college education. A similar situation is denounced by the Tamil Nadu *Archaka's* Welfare Sangam (grouping Gurukkals – a sub-Brahmin caste) that complains about the fact that the community is not given ‘due respect’ by government.

Then, the field material has provided evidence of two main roles of caste associations. First, they regulate the internal relationships in two major ways: by defining a widely accepted behavioural code and by providing several forms of social support for the weakest members. Since caste associations are in some cases also occupation groups, this internal self-regulation easily becomes a major organising factor for the economy with a direct influence on capital/labour relationships and regulating working conditions. Second, caste associations explicitly involve political exchanges with the state for the intermediation of particularist interests. The most common attempt takes the form of lobbying to obtain a lower caste status – a behaviour which is broadly found among all BC and FC associations. Other forms of political bargaining and negotiations range from requesting recognition of the public importance of specific activities to seeking protection from police harassment, and to the request of Brahmins for an improved access to public employment and more ‘respectful’ treatment by the state.

‘Welfare’ associations complete Arni’s associational order. These associations, whose spheres of action range from philanthropy to lobbying for the town’s infrastructure, are significant because they contain and enhance the cross-caste idea of the town’s ‘unity’. Elite associations such as the Rotary Club, the Lions Club (together with its women’s

wing), and the Inner Wheel Club of Arni (another women's association), which are in principle open to all social classes components, actually group the well-off members of the town and legitimate the role of the elites, emphasising the importance of philanthropy. These associations are involved in several forms of 'social service organisations' in the fields of health, education, and charity. They assist in the central and local government's social campaigns and organise free distributions of food, books, clothes and medicines. In their several activities they work in close collaboration with public institutions, such as hospitals and schools.

Production relations in Arni's civil society

Arni's associational order reflects social production relations. Capital and labour are represented in a variety of forms. Yet, to identify these forms might be a challenging task because Arni, like India at large, has a complex socio-economic structure in which caste is intertwined with class. In relation to labour, the social structure operates at two levels. First, labour is aggregated in several caste associations, mainly in the SC and in MBC categories. Second, some 'professional' and 'business' associations (i.e. petty trade and small activities' associations¹²) organise individuals who, while formally 'independent' workers, lack economic autonomy and depend on informal credit markets and on merchants for the provision of inputs, and are often 'wage labour in disguise'. Such associations are best interpreted as representing 'labour' rather than 'capital'.

Non-class associations, such as caste and petty business associations, also have an ideological role as they concur in undermining the class-consciousness of the lower strata of Arni's society. The political-economic organisation of wage-labour and other types of 'dependent' labour on the basis of non-class criteria substitutes for the formal representation of workers in trade unions.

Another feature of Arni's social structure is found in the role of 'big' business associations in the internal management of industrial relations. 'Big' business associations are overt associations of capitalists who directly control intra-firm labour/capital relations defining behavioural codes in ways that are widely recognised by members, by virtue of the low degree of voluntariness of membership.¹³ Moreover, 'big' business associations are involved in the bargaining with the state in fields

¹² Such as the Fruit and Vegetable Traders, and small business associations, such as the Rickshaw Pullers Association and the Car and Van Drivers Association.

¹³ Major examples are the Paddy and Rice Merchants Association and the Arni Silk Merchants Association.

including working conditions that are relevant for the sector as a whole. This role helps explaining the absence of unions in the private sector, because employers represent the interests of the employees in any context they believe to be relevant.

A major trait of Arni's associational order is the asymmetry between the representation of labour and capital. While employers are widely organised by means of interest groups that shape inter-firm relations, control intra-firm relations, and bargain over the terms of state intervention, employees' organisations are weak and lack a collective dimension. This may explain why unions are missing, while the working class interests often blend with other social components, as in the cases of cultural and religious associations, or are aggregated on the basis of features other than social production relations, as in the case of caste associations. The only cases of collective workers' organisations in the contemporary meaning of the term are to be found in the trade unions of public sector workers.

5. The role of caste in Arni's societal corporatism

The survey of Arni's civil society provides strong evidence of an associational order that is built on economic and non-economic associations governing the production process in all phases as representatives of the interests of capital and labour. It also shows that the state is a central institution of 'governance' and that the open aim of Arni's associations is to bargain with the state in order to obtain advantages for their members. In this sense, Arni's associations appear to be *intermediaries* – and not only *representatives* and *regulators* – of class interests.

Arni's associational order is biased toward capital. The representation of capital is strong – owing to the joint action of 'big' business associations and locally dominant caste associations. By contrast, there is a systematic under-representation of labour, owing to the lack of labour associations together with the absorption of the (disguised) labour force under non-economic and non-class associations. This bias against labour implies that decisions about the recruitment of workers and about working conditions are in the hands of capital. The main responsibility for the low level of representation of workers in trade unions is due to the way caste associations and caste ideology neutralise class.

The survey evidence reported here is largely consistent with the hypothesis that caste

plays a two-fold role as an institution and an ideology in organising civil society and supporting capital's hegemony. While Arni's associations provide the cross-class institutional structure in which capital's hegemony is negotiated, caste associations are important and distinctive institutions which regulate economic behaviour inside each caste group and behave as intermediaries in the political relationship with the state.

Arni's organised civil society shows features that are typical of societal corporatism: i) the associational order emerges from the pressure of social groups and is composed of associations of individuals sharing social and economic interests; ii) these interest associations are involved in several types of socio-economic relations in each phase of the production process; and iii) the underlying function of the associational order is to regulate social relationships and to create the conditions for economic growth. Associations are at the same time *regulators*, *representatives* and *intermediaries* of particularistic interests, and perform their regulatory role in three major ways: by helping to determine members' interests; by negotiating agreements on members' behalf; and by enforcing such agreements to their members.

Arni's corporatist regime is tripartite, involving state, capital and labour. Yet, the standard tripartite logic of political exchange is adapted to Arni's social structure and informal economy, in which capital and labour are jointly represented and regulated by class and non-class associations. Caste is a major pillar of Arni's corporatism.

Membership is the necessary condition to participate in political relationships, while – in particular in cases such as 'big' business associations – non-participation implies exclusion from political exchange and often also from entry into economic activity. Accordingly, the degree of voluntariness of participation in interest associations in Arni is low and decreasing as the importance of economic interests increases.

The by-product of Arni's societal corporatism is a social stability that is obtained by controlling the level of conflicts. The field material reveals a common tendency to deny the relevance, or even the existence, of both capital/labour conflicts and inter-firm conflicts. The absence of inter-firm conflicts appears to be the result of the very existence and action of (trade and business) associations, and suggests that to limit inter-firm conflicts is their social function and that membership means accepting this. One possible implication is that the absence of inter-firm conflicts should be seen as an indicator of the efficacy of the associations in performing their function.

The situation is much more complex in the case of capital/labour conflicts. The survey shows that there is a major asymmetry in the representation of labour and capital. This asymmetry goes together with another important asymmetry that refers to the management of capital/labour relations. From the survey we understand that capital/labour relations are usually managed within individual firms and are directly controlled by employers. Associations of capitalists define the rules concerning the enrolment of workers and working conditions. They also control the 'misbehaviour' of workers and the collective punishment of individual actions against the rules.

Caste ideology is functional to the corporatist project. Paradoxically, by undermining class-consciousness and by fracturing the unity of the working class, caste enhances social cohesion. Moreover, it provides the ideological instruments which limit the perception of the quasi-compulsory nature of the associational order, ensuring a 'voluntary' consensus in favour of the hegemony of the dominant classes, and promoting the 'voluntary' participation of subaltern classes in organised civil society.

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Table 1 - Associations and informal groups in Arni by membership and by influence on phases of production and typologies of socio-economic relation (economic activities)

Production of goods	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(l)	(m)	(n)
Rice												
ARNI TALUK RICE MILL OWNERS' ASSN	1				1			1			1	
PADDY AND RICE MERCHANTS ASSN			1				1	1		1		
Silk												
THE ARNI SILK MERCHANTS ASSN	1											1
THE TIRUVANNAMALAI DISTRICT HANDLOOM SILK DESIGNERS ASSN	1							1				
SILK TWISTERS ASSN			1			1	1	1		1		
Gold												
THE TAMILNADU JEWEL WORKERS CENTRAL SANGAM			1		1	1		1	1		1	
TAMILNADU GOLD & SILVER MERCHANTS FEDERATION, CHENNAI			1				1	1		1		
Buildings												
THE TAMILNADU BUILDING WORKERS SANGAM, ARNI			1					1	1		1	
ARNI ELECTRICIANS' SANGAM		1			1	1	1		1	1	1	
ARNI BRICK MAKERS ASSN			1									
QUARRY WORKERS			1									
CEMENT DEALERS												
ELECTRICITY BOARD UNION—CITU	1							1	1			
Others												
FERTILISERS AND PESTICIDES												
SODA FACTORY ASSN			1	1	1	1		1		1		
BAKERIES												
ARNI SMALL SCALE INDUSTRIES ASSN	1								1		1	
Public sector unions												
ARNI BRANCH OF THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF POSTAL EMPLOYEES	1											
SANITARY WORKERS' SANGAM, ARNI			1					1		1		
NURSERY SCHOOLS												
ARNI ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS FEDERATION	1								1			
Private traditional services												
Personal services												
THE TAMIL NADU ASSN OF SHAVING SALOONS		1			1		1	1	1			1
THE ARNI WASHMANS' (DHABI) UNION		1					1		1	1		
THE ASSN FOR THE PROGRESS OF TAILORS	1						1			1		
TEA STALL												
LOTTERY TICKETS												
Consumer goods												
THE GROCERY MERCHANTS ASSN OF ARNI		1			1			1	1			1
ARNI TOWN FRUITS MERCHANTS ASSN		1			1		1			1	1	
THE ARNI TOWN FLOWERS MERCHANT SANGAM			1				1		1		1	
ARNI GREENGROCERS ASSN (GANDHI MARKET), ARNI			1				1	1	1			
VINAYAKA TEXTILES												
Transport												
THE VALAMPURI VINAYAKAR RICKSHAWS PULLERS' ASSN		1			1			1	1			
THE ARNI AUTO OWNERS AND DRIVERS WELFARE UNION		1				1	1	1			1	
THE ARNI LORRY OWNERS ASSN	1				1		1	1	1	1	1	
DR.AMBEDKAR TRANSPORT WORKERS' UNION, ARNI	1					1		1		1		
ARINGAR ARNI BULLOCK—CART DRIVERS' SANGAM 226—235			1				1				1	
THE TIRUVANNAMALAI DISTRICT BUS OWNERS; ASSN		1						1	1			
ARNI AREA CAR AND VAN DRIVERS' WELFARE ASSN			1			1	1	1	1		1	
TWO WHEELERS (MOPEDS ETC.,) SPARE PARTS—SALES ASSN												
PEDDAL BICYCLE DEALERS (MRA CYCLE MART), ARNI												

Table 1 (cont.)

Production of goods	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(l)	(m)	(n)
Finance												
ARNI PAWNBROKERS ASSN			1	1			1	1		1		
Others												
THE ARNI CHAMBER OF COMMERCE	1							1				
THE ADVOCATES BAR ASSN			1						1			
PORTERS ASSN			1				1		1			
TURNING WORKS (LATHE "PATTARIAS")			1				1	1	1			
PHARMACISTS AND DRUGGIST ASSN			1				1	1		1		
New activities												
Communication												
ASSN OF TELEPHONE SUBSCRIBERS	1						1				1	
TELEPHONE BOOTHS												
PROFESSIONAL COURIERS												
Printing												
TYPEWRITING (COMMERCIAL EDUCATION) INSTITUTES												
XEROX												
PRINTING PRESS												
Cinema and television												
THE ARNI VIDEO CASSTTE LIBRARY ASSN	1						1					
THE CINEMA THEATRE OWNERS ASSN			1								1	
CABLE TV OPERATORS			1								1	
Electronics												
COMPUTER STUDIES												
(GEETHA) ELECTRONICS AND HOME APPLIANCES												
Finance												
FINANCE COMPANIES												
BANKS												

Legenda for Tables 1 and 2: (a) Voluntary association; (b) Voluntary exclusive association; (c) Quasi-voluntary professional association; (d) Quasi-voluntary membership by birth; (e) Factors; (f) Processes; (g) Products; (h) Capital-labour relations; (i) Capital-state relations; (l) Labour-state relations; (m) Inter-capital relations; (n) Non-economic relations.

Table 2 - Associations and informal groups in Arni by membership and by influence on phases of production and typologies of socio-economic relations (non-economic activities)

Caste associations	(a)	(d)	(c)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(l)	(m)	(n)
SAURASHTRA PODHU SABHA	1		1		1			1		1
THE SAURASHTRA WOMAN'S ASSOCIATION, ARNI	1									1
THE NAIDU ASSN OF ARNI	1							1		1
THE TAMIL NADU KARNEEGAR SANGAM, ARNI	1									1
THE ARNI TOWN VANNIARS ASSN	1									1
THE ARNI TULUVA VELALAR SANGAM	1									1
THE TIRUVANNAMALAI DISTRICT VAANIAR SANGAM	1								1	1
THE TAMILNADU BRAHMINS SANGAM ("TAMBRAS") - ARNI BRANCH	1									1
THE TAMILNADU ARCHAKAS WELFARE SANGAM	1		1							1
TAMIL SAIVA CHETTIAR	1									1
THE ARNI KANNADA VEERA SAIVA JAINEEKAR SANGAM	1					1				1
THE ARNI TOWN SENGUNTHAR SANGAM	1									1
YAADAVAS	1									1
AHAMUDAIYA MUDALIARS SANGAM	1							1	1	1
Religious and political associations										
THE INDIAN REPUBLICAN PARTY	1									1
COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA—MARXIST	1				1				1	
MUSLIMS	1									
ROMAN CATHOLICS	1									
PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS	1									
JAINS		1								
Welfare associations										
THE INNER WHEEL CLUB OF ARNI	1									
THE LIONS CLUB OF ARNI	1									1
THE ROTARY CLUB OF ARNI	1						1			1
ALL PENSIONERS ASSN	1								1	
THE ARNI TOWN WELFARE COMMITTEE	1								1	
THE LIONESS CLUB	1									1

Legenda: see Table 3.

Table 3 - Registered and unregistered associations in Arni by membership and by impact on social stability

	Number of schedules	Impact on social stability					social relations	Total*
		k-l relations	k-state relations	l-state relations	k-k relations			
Voluntary membership	21	5	6	4	5	9	29	
Excluding voluntary membership	12	7	7	2	4	2	22	
Quasi-voluntary membership by profession	17	1	3	3	2	15	24	
Quasi-voluntary membership by birth	16	1	2	2	2	15	22	
TOTAL	66	14	18	11	13	41	97	

Legenda: k = capital; l= labour.

* Associations may impact on several aspects of social stability.