

CASTE AS STRUCTURE AND CONTRADICTION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF AN AND TELTUMBDE'S WRITINGS

*Lohiya K.J.R. **

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21416727>

ABSTRACT

*This paper offers a critical examination of how Anand Teltumbde theorises caste in contemporary India. Moving beyond conventional interpretations that treat caste as a declining social hierarchy, Teltumbde conceptualises it as an evolving structure embedded within modern economic and political systems. Through an analysis of key works such as *The Persistence of Caste* and *Republic of Caste*, this study demonstrates how caste adapts to neoliberal capitalism, democratic institutions, and identity-based politics. By situating caste within the framework of political economy, Teltumbde reorients Dalit discourse toward structural critique. This paper argues that his work exposes the limitations of liberal narratives of progress and calls for a deeper engagement with systemic inequality.*

KEYWORDS: *Caste, Dalit Studies, Postcolonialism, Anand Teltumbde, Capitalism, Democracy, Identity Politics.*

* **Lohiya K.J.R.**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, GFGC, Ranebennur, Haveri.

1. Introduction

The persistence of caste in India poses a significant challenge to narratives of modernity and social transformation. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and decades of democratic governance, caste continues to influence access to resources, social mobility, and political representation. Rather than interpreting these continuities as remnants of a pre-modern past, Anand Teltumbde argues that caste has undergone a process of transformation, adapting itself to the institutional and economic realities of contemporary India (Teltumbde Persistence 23).

This paper examines Teltumbde's reconceptualisation of caste as a structural and material phenomenon. It places his work in dialogue with major scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar, Gail Omvedt, and Satish Deshpande, while also drawing on broader theoretical insights into inequality and modernity. In doing so, it argues that Teltumbde's framework provides a crucial lens for understanding how caste persists not despite modernity, but through it.

2. Caste as a Structural Formation

A central contribution of Teltumbde's work lies in his insistence that caste must be analysed as a structural formation rather than a purely cultural or ideological system. This perspective builds upon the foundational insights of B. R. Ambedkar, who identified caste as a system rooted in graded inequality and sustained through mechanisms of exclusion (Ambedkar 45). As Teltumbde notes, "caste persists in new institutional forms" (Teltumbde 62). However, Teltumbde extends this analysis by situating caste within contemporary economic and institutional contexts.

Sociologists such as André Béteille have long argued that inequality in India emerges from the intersection of caste, class, and power (Béteille 45). Teltumbde deepens this insight by demonstrating how these intersections operate within neoliberal frameworks. Rather than diminishing caste, modern institutions often reproduce it in less visible but more entrenched forms.

This structural understanding is further reinforced by Anupama Rao, who emphasises that caste functions through everyday practices and institutional arrangements (Rao 112). Teltumbde's analysis aligns with this view, showing that caste is embedded in systems of education, employment, and governance. As a result, caste cannot be reduced to identity alone; it must be understood as a mode of organising social and economic life.

3. Caste, Capitalism, and the Illusion of Equality

One of Teltumbde's most significant interventions is his critique

of the relationship between caste and capitalism. Contrary to the widely held belief that market forces promote meritocracy and social mobility, he argues that capitalism in India has adapted to preexisting hierarchies. Economic liberalisation, rather than dismantling caste, has often intensified inequalities by enabling dominant groups to consolidate their advantages (Teltumbde Republic 75).

This argument resonates with the broader critique of inequality advanced by Thomas Piketty, who demonstrates that economic growth does not automatically lead to equitable distribution (Piketty 67). In the Indian context, this dynamic is further complicated by caste-based disparities in access to education, capital, and social networks.

Scholars such as K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu have similarly argued that neoliberal reforms have failed to address structural inequalities, particularly those affecting Dalit communities (Satyanarayana and Tharu 210). Teltumbde's work synthesises these insights, demonstrating that caste and class are not separate axes of inequality but are deeply interconnected.

In urban settings, this interconnection becomes particularly evident. While cities are often seen as spaces of anonymity and mobility, Satish Deshpande observes that caste continues to shape patterns of privilege and exclusion, even when it appears to be invisible (Deshpande 56). Teltumbde's analysis supports this claim, suggesting that the apparent decline of caste in urban contexts is largely superficial.

4. Democracy and Its Contradictions

India's democratic framework is frequently celebrated as a model of political inclusion. However, Teltumbde highlights a fundamental contradiction between formal equality and substantive inequality. While democratic institutions provide opportunities for representation, they do not necessarily challenge the structural conditions that sustain caste hierarchies (Teltumbde Republic 110).

Political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot has shown how caste identities continue to shape electoral politics, influencing both voter behaviour and party strategies (Jaffrelot 134). Teltumbde builds on this observation by questioning whether such forms of representation lead to meaningful transformation.

This critique is echoed by Gopal Guru, who argues that symbolic inclusion often fails to address deeper inequalities (Guru 98). Teltumbde extends this argument to identity politics more broadly, suggesting that an exclusive focus on identity can obscure the structural dimensions of caste oppression.

At the same time, his critique does not reject identity-based movements outright. Instead, it calls for a more comprehensive approach that integrates identity with questions of political economy. Such an approach, he argues, is necessary for addressing the systemic nature of caste.

5. State, Violence, and Structural Impunity

Teltumbde's analysis also foregrounds the state's role in reproducing caste hierarchies. While policies such as reservations aim to address historical injustices, they often operate within frameworks that leave underlying structures intact. As a result, their transformative potential remains limited (Teltumbde Republic 135).

The persistence of caste-based violence further underscores these limitations. In his study of the Khairlanji incident, Teltumbde demonstrates how acts of violence are not isolated incidents but manifestations of deeply embedded social hierarchies (Teltumbde Khairlanji 10). The failure of institutions such as the police and judiciary to deliver justice reflects a broader pattern of structural bias.

This emphasis on systemic violence reinforces the need to move beyond legal and institutional reforms toward more fundamental social transformation. It also highlights the importance of engaging with caste as a question of power rather than merely identity.

6. Revisiting Ambedkar in the Contemporary Context

Teltumbde's engagement with B. R. Ambedkar is both critical and constructive. While he acknowledges Ambedkar's foundational role in theorising caste, he also argues that contemporary conditions require a rethinking of Ambedkarite strategies (Ambedkar 78).

Teltumbde critiques the tendency to reduce Ambedkar's legacy to symbolic gestures, such as commemorations and slogans. Instead, he advocates for a deeper engagement with Ambedkar's vision of social and economic transformation. By situating this vision within the context of neoliberal capitalism, Teltumbde extends its relevance to contemporary struggles.

7. Conclusion

Anand Teltumbde's work offers a powerful critique of dominant narratives surrounding caste, modernity, and development in India. By conceptualising caste as an evolving structural system, he challenges the assumption that social progress naturally leads to equality. Instead, his analysis reveals how caste continues to shape economic opportunities, political processes, and institutional practices.

The significance of Teltumbde's contribution lies in its insistence that caste cannot be understood in isolation. It must be analysed in relation to broader systems of power, including capitalism and the state. Only by addressing these structural dimensions can meaningful social transformation be achieved.

References:

1. Ambedkar, B. R. Annihilation of Caste. 1936.
2. Teltumbde, Anand. The Persistence of Caste. Navayana, 2010.
3. Teltumbde, Anand. Republic of Caste. Navayana, 2018.
4. Teltumbde, Anand. Dalits: Past, Present, and Future. Routledge, 2016.
5. Teltumbde, Anand. The Khairlanji Murders. Navayana, 2010.
6. Omvedt, Gail. Dalits and the Democratic Revolution. Sage Publications, 1994.
7. Piketty, Thomas. Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Harvard University Press, 2014.
8. Rao, Anupama. The Caste Question. University of California Press, 2009.
9. Satyanarayana, K., and Susie Tharu, editors. No Alphabet in Sight. Penguin, 2011.
10. Srinivas, M. N. Social Change in Modern India. University of California Press, 1966.