



Durkheim in India: Analyzing Caste, Religion, and Solidarity Through a Durkheimian Lens

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Abstract

This research paper examines the applicability of Émile Durkheim's sociological framework to the Indian context, with a particular focus on the intersecting roles of caste, religion, and social solidarity. As a foundational figure in sociology, Durkheim conceptualized society as a moral community held together by collective beliefs and practices, which is especially pertinent in understanding India's enduring social structures. The caste system, traditionally based on notions of purity, hierarchy, and hereditary occupation, is analyzed through Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity, which binds individuals through shared values and a collective conscience. The study also explores the challenges posed to this solidarity in a society transitioning towards modernity and increasing social differentiation—conditions that require a shift towards organic solidarity. Furthermore, the role of religion in Indian society is critically examined through Durkheim's lens, highlighting its integrative function in maintaining moral boundaries and communal identity. By incorporating insights from Indian thinkers such as B.R. Ambedkar and M.N. Srinivas, this paper blends classical theory with indigenous perspectives, offering a nuanced view of Indian social life. It argues that despite the rise of individualism and secularism, caste and religion continue to shape collective behavior, contributing to both cohesion and conflict. Overall, the study emphasizes the continuing relevance of Durkheimian theory in interpreting social phenomena beyond the Western world, advocating for a comparative sociological approach.

Keywords: Durkheim, caste system, social solidarity, religion in India, anomie, structural functionalism

Introduction

Émile Durkheim is one of the founding figures of sociology, particularly known for his emphasis on social cohesion, moral order, and the collective aspects of human life. His theoretical contributions have helped shape modern understandings of how societies function, change, and maintain equilibrium. Though developed within the Western European context, Durkheim's concepts, especially those concerning social facts,

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solidarity, and religion, offer a rich framework for analyzing non-Western societies such as India. Indian society, with its persistent caste hierarchies, plural religious practices, and evolving structures of social integration, provides fertile ground to test and extend Durkheimian theory.

India is a society deeply rooted in traditional institutions like caste and religion, both of which have shaped its social fabric for centuries. Despite legal and political reforms in the postcolonial era, caste remains a significant determinant of social status, access to resources, and identity. Similarly, religion plays a dual role, acting as a cohesive force and, at times, a source of division. Durkheim's ideas on the sacred and profane, the collective conscience, and forms of solidarity offer important analytical tools to explore these phenomena. His broader concern with how societies maintain order amidst differentiation and complexity is especially relevant to contemporary India.

This paper aims to reinterpret the Indian caste system, religious practices, and the dynamics of social solidarity through a Durkheimian lens. It investigates how caste and religion function as social facts and how the nature of solidarity is transforming in response to economic modernization and urbanization. The central research question is: *Can Durkheim's theory of social facts and solidarity explain the persistence and transformation of caste and religion in Indian society?*

The following sections will first explore Durkheim's theoretical framework, particularly his views on social facts, solidarity, and religion. The analysis will then apply these concepts to the Indian caste system and religious practices, examining how traditional forms of mechanical solidarity are giving way to organic forms, and the extent to which anomie or normlessness accompanies this transition. Finally, the paper reflects on the limitations of applying Durkheim's Eurocentric model to the Indian context, highlighting both its utility and the need for theoretical adaptation.

Durkheim's Theoretical Framework

Durkheim's sociology is grounded in the idea that society is not simply a collection of individuals but a complex system of relationships, norms, and collective representations. Central to his theory is the concept of **social facts**, which he defines as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion" (Durkheim, 1895, p. 56). Social facts include institutions like religion, education, and law, structures that constrain individual behavior and reflect the collective conscience.

A key component of Durkheim's theory is **social solidarity**, elaborated in *The Division of Labor in Society*. He distinguishes between two types: **mechanical solidarity**, typical of traditional societies, where cohesion arises from homogeneity, shared beliefs, and strong collective conscience; and **organic solidarity**, found in modern societies, where individuals perform specialized roles and are united through interdependence.

(Durkheim, 1893, pp. 70–75). These forms are not mutually exclusive but represent points along a continuum of social evolution.

Religion occupies a special place in Durkheim's thought. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he argues that religion is not merely about supernatural belief but is fundamentally social, it expresses collective values and binds individuals to a moral order (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 213–217). He introduces the concepts of the **sacred and profane**, with the sacred referring to things set apart and venerated, and the profane to ordinary, everyday matters. Through rituals, individuals experience **collective effervescence**, reinforcing social bonds and the moral authority of the group (Durkheim, 1912, p. 217).

Durkheim's theory of **anomie**, introduced in *Suicide*, describes a condition of normlessness that arises when social norms fail to regulate behavior, especially during rapid social change (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 208–212). This concept is particularly relevant to societies experiencing modernization, urban migration, and weakening of traditional institutions.

Thus, Durkheim provides a robust framework to understand how institutions maintain societal integration. His concepts of solidarity, social facts, religion, and anomie offer a foundation to analyze structural continuity and change in complex societies like India.

The Indian Caste System Through Durkheim's Lens

The Indian caste system exemplifies what Durkheim termed a **social fact**, a pattern of behavior and belief that is external, collective, and coercive (Durkheim, 1895, p. 56). Caste determines birth-based roles, occupations, and social status, deeply embedded in cultural norms and religious ideologies. From a Durkheimian perspective, caste is a mechanism of **mechanical solidarity**, where shared norms and strict group boundaries ensure social cohesion through resemblance and homogeneity (Durkheim, 1893, pp. 85–88).

Caste functions by organizing society into closed groups or *jatis*, each with its own occupational and ritual roles. This structure fosters moral consensus within each caste and across the hierarchical order. According to Srinivas (1962), caste-based social roles historically contributed to social stability, as each group knew its duties and obligations (pp. 34–37). Such functional differentiation aligns with Durkheim's idea of society being a moral entity organized through shared values and norms.

However, modern India presents a more complex picture. Post-independence constitutional reforms and economic changes have undermined the traditional caste system's rigidity. Yet, caste persists, not only in rural social organization but also in urban spaces, education, politics, and marriage (Béteille, 1996, pp. 109–112). Durkheim's idea of **anomie** helps explain this contradiction. As social norms evolve, individuals from lower

castes often experience normlessness due to lack of integration in new structures or contradictions between traditional and modern values (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 211–212).

Importantly, movements for social justice, especially those led by B. R. Ambedkar, challenged the moral legitimacy of caste as a basis for social cohesion. Ambedkar (2014/1936) argued that caste perpetuates inequality and must be annihilated to build a society based on justice and equality (pp. 50–59). His critique echoes Durkheim's call for a **morally integrated** society in which social divisions are bridged through new forms of solidarity (Durkheim, 1893, pp. 138–142).

In sum, caste can be seen both as a mechanism of mechanical solidarity and as a site of contestation. Durkheim's framework enables us to understand caste's persistence as a social fact, while also highlighting the need for moral evolution and new forms of solidarity in modern India.

Religion in Indian Society and Durkheim's Theory

Durkheim saw religion as central to the formation and maintenance of social cohesion. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he argued that religion represents the collective conscience and that rituals serve to reaffirm the social order (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 215–217). Religion, in this view, is not a reflection of divine truth but of society worshipping itself through symbols, totems, and ceremonies (Durkheim, 1912, p. 236). These ideas can be directly applied to India, a land marked by diverse and deeply institutionalized religious traditions.

In India, religion functions as a powerful social fact. It is embedded not only in individual belief systems but in public life, state policies, and communal identities. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and other faiths coexist, sometimes harmoniously and at other times contentiously. Hinduism, in particular, is structured around complex rituals, festivals, and a shared cosmology that mirrors Durkheim's concept of religion as a collective representation of society. For instance, Fuller (2004) describes how Hindu rituals such as puja (worship) and temple festivals facilitate communal bonding and reaffirm shared moral values (pp. 83–89). These practices resonate with Durkheim's idea of **collective effervescence**, wherein participation in religious rituals heightens emotional unity and reinforces the social order (Durkheim, 1912, p. 217).

Moreover, Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane helps us understand how Indian religious practices segregate everyday life from spiritual domains. Sacred objects, spaces (like temples), and times (like festival days) are sharply demarcated from ordinary routines. Such distinctions serve to elevate community life above the mundane, instilling a sense of shared transcendence and moral discipline (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 224–228).

However, religion in India is also a source of division. Communal violence and religious nationalism challenge Durkheim's optimistic view of religion as a unifying force. For example, political mobilization around religious identity has led to polarization, as seen in the Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat and Delhi. These conflicts reflect a breakdown of collective conscience and may be viewed through Durkheim's concept of **anomie**, where the sacred is manipulated for political gain, weakening its integrative function (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 209–210).

Thus, while Indian religious life aligns with many of Durkheim's theories, especially regarding collective rituals and moral cohesion, it also exposes the tensions and contradictions within religious pluralism. Durkheim's theory must therefore be adapted to accommodate both the integrative and divisive potentials of religion in India.

Indian Society and the Evolution of Solidarity

Durkheim posited that as societies become more complex, solidarity transitions from mechanical to organic. In mechanical solidarity, individuals are bonded by likeness; in organic solidarity, by functional interdependence resulting from the division of labor (Durkheim, 1893, pp. 129–134). This evolutionary framework provides a lens to analyze changes in Indian society, especially in the context of modernization, urbanization, and economic liberalization.

Traditionally, Indian society displayed features of mechanical solidarity. Shared religious beliefs, caste hierarchies, and village-based economies fostered a strong collective conscience. People were tied to their birth groups through ritual obligations and moral expectations, much in line with Durkheim's description of pre-modern societies (Durkheim, 1893, pp. 130–132). However, in contemporary India, these bonds are loosening due to increased mobility, education, and economic diversification.

As people migrate to cities and engage in new forms of labor, relationships based on functional interdependence begin to emerge. Inter-caste and inter-religious workplaces, diverse residential communities, and globalized consumption patterns foster new solidarities. Robbins (2020) notes that Indian urban centers increasingly reflect organic solidarity, where cooperation is based not on likeness but on the mutual dependence of differentiated roles (pp. 160–162). Yet this transition is far from complete. Traditional identities persist, often resulting in **hybrid solidarities**, a mixture of mechanical and organic forms.

Moreover, the speed of change has outpaced moral regulation, leading to social fragmentation and a weakening of collective conscience. This reflects Durkheim's concern with anomie, especially during periods of rapid transformation (Durkheim, 1897, pp. 210–212). Youth alienation, rising mental health issues, and political

polarization are symptoms of this anomic condition. In rural areas, the decline of caste-based occupations without corresponding alternatives has also led to disillusionment and social unrest.

However, new forms of solidarity are emerging. Social movements based on gender, environment, and human rights, often cutting across caste and religious lines, represent the potential for moral integration in a differentiated society. These align with Durkheim's later ideas about the **moral density** of modern societies, where solidarity is not given but must be actively cultivated (Durkheim, 1893, pp. 142–145).

Therefore, Indian society is in a transitional phase, moving unevenly from mechanical to organic solidarity. Durkheim's framework remains useful but must be nuanced to reflect the coexistence of tradition and modernity in a pluralistic context.

Critical Reflections and Limitations

While Durkheim's theories offer valuable insights into caste, religion, and solidarity in India, several limitations emerge when applying a Eurocentric framework to a non-Western society. First, Durkheim's model is evolutionist, implying that societies must move from mechanical to organic solidarity. This linear progression does not fully capture the complexities of Indian society, where traditional and modern elements often coexist or even reinforce each other (Srinivas, 1962, pp. 48–50).

Second, Durkheim underplays issues of power and inequality. His emphasis on moral integration assumes that societal norms are generally consensual. In India, caste and religious hierarchies are maintained through coercion, discrimination, and violence. The caste system, far from being an integrative mechanism, systematically excludes lower castes and Dalits from meaningful participation. Ambedkar (1936) sharply critiqued this, arguing that caste is a mechanism of social oppression, not cohesion (pp. 52–56). This criticism highlights Durkheim's limited attention to structural violence and marginalization.

Third, Durkheim's theory assumes a strong and homogeneous collective conscience. In India, however, multiple moral orders coexist, caste-based, religious, regional, and political, often leading to conflict rather than consensus. This moral plurality challenges the applicability of a single collective conscience as the basis for solidarity.

Fourth, Durkheim's analysis of religion, though profound, is grounded in the study of totemic societies and lacks the tools to analyze religious pluralism and political religion. In India, religious identities are not merely moral frameworks but are also sites of political contestation and state intervention. The instrumentalization of religion by political actors complicates its role as a unifying social fact.

Finally, Durkheim's methodology is predominantly macro-sociological and does not sufficiently engage with the lived experiences of individuals. Ethnographic studies and postcolonial critiques have shown that caste and religion are not only institutional structures but are also experienced through everyday practices, negotiations, and resistances (Béteille, 1996, pp. 127–131). A comprehensive understanding of Indian society thus requires supplementing Durkheim's structural focus with more interpretive and critical approaches.

Despite these limitations, Durkheim remains a foundational figure whose ideas continue to illuminate key aspects of Indian society. However, their application must be reflexive, critical, and context-sensitive.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the enduring relevance of Émile Durkheim's sociological framework in analyzing the Indian caste system, religious practices, and forms of solidarity. Durkheim's concepts of social facts, mechanical and organic solidarity, the sacred and profane, and anomie provide powerful lenses through which to understand the persistence and transformation of social institutions in India.

Caste functions as both a social fact and a mechanism of mechanical solidarity, yet it is increasingly challenged by modern forces and egalitarian movements. Religion continues to foster collective effervescence and moral community but also serves as a site of contestation. Indian society is undergoing a complex transition towards organic solidarity, marked by both integration and anomie. While Durkheim's theories offer useful tools for understanding these dynamics, they must be critically adapted to account for the unique historical, political, and cultural features of Indian society.

The paper concludes that Durkheim's ideas, when applied thoughtfully and contextually, offer valuable insights but require supplementation by perspectives attentive to power, inequality, and pluralism. In doing so, we not only enrich our understanding of Indian society but also extend the analytical power of classical sociological theory.

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