CHAPTER NINE

THE DISEQUILIBRIUM OF TESTOCRACY

The sociological contradictions may provide a round-up of the dysfunctionalities produced by public examinations in India. Our thesis here is that they have introduced a new principle of social organization. There has arisen the cult of testocracy out of the logic of sorting out which, in an economy of exclusion, produces new and intensified tensions.

9.1 The Social Organization in India

Some kind of stratification is present virtually in every human society. There cannot simply be any perfectly classless society. Classless, non-hierarchical societies are largely the mental constructs of philosophers, the dream of modern-bound political prophets, the vision of religious idealists or the promise of demagogues. George Orwell's tongue-in-the-cheek dictum that 'all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others', is quite relevant in this contest.

A society may be viewed to be stratified in different ways: functional differentiation, institutionalized inequality

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or social stratification. The very notion of society entails differentiation. A population is functionally differentiated when some of its members regularly do and are expected to do different things. Institutionalized inequality exists when as a matter of more or less consistent practice different roles are differently rewarded, when their performance confers status distinctions, or when performances of a given type of role are differentially evaluated. Social stratification refers to the persistence of position in a hierarchy of inequality, either over the lifetime of a birth cohort of individuals, or more particularly between generations. Its important features could be listed as: social character, antiquity, ubiquity, diversity and consequentiality. The mechanism which converts social inequality into social stratification is intergenerational transmission of status and incidentally continuity of status over the life span.

India has been the classic example of social stratification. Its social organization has always been dominated by a rigid hereditary caste system in which the position of individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth. The position cannot be changed except under unusual circumstances. The structure is, of course, highly complex. Today, there are many castes and subcastes in the society that are grounded in four basic ones. There are over two thousand jatis or subcastes among Brahmins alone. This is
probably the most complete system of socially inherited inequality of social relationships that any society has known.

The categoric limitation on mobility from one caste to another in the system is accompanied by associated characteristics. Marriages are endogamous. Castes follow definite occupations so that the members of each caste are united by the kind of work they do. Levels of living in the caste are largely determined by the occupational opportunities each caste possesses. The status of each caste is carefully protected, not only by caste law but by the conventions that are understood within the communities.

The fundamental structure has, more or less, remained unchanged for over three millennia. The system is so tenacious and strong that it has withstood all attacks on it. The 6th Century B.C. saw the rise of Buddhism which questioned the basis of the caste system although some scholars have maintained that it was a Ksatriya movement against Brahminical supremacy. More recently, the Bhakti movement contained elements which ran counter to caste ideology. The caste system has survived even conversions to Christianity and Islam. The fact is that it continues in spite of new social factors very much at work now.
There have been historical and cultural factors like industrialization, bureaucratization and urbanization which may not have undermined the caste system but have left their impact. Alongside the social stratification, the Indian society has recently been divided into social classes. In the latter, the differentiating characteristic is important to the people involved and they see themselves as being different from the rest. The distinctions between classes are not just economic. It is not a question of economics or of wealth alone, it is also a question of breeding, of the mode of speech, of culture, of being able to say and do the right things at the right time. It has become associated with standards and modes of behaviour as well as with patterns of expenditure and consumption. Stalcup defines social class as a level in society made up of people who consider themselves equal due to similarities in family background, level of education, occupation, race and attitude towards social issues. In spite of a well-entrenched caste-system, the Indian Society has also started having social classes. There has particularly been a sociological recurrent of 'embourgeoisement'. It has led to 'middle-classness' which is indicated by the decline of gregariousness of the

1. R.J. Stalcup, Sociology and Education, (Ohio: Merrill, 1969)
communal forms of sociability, emergence of home-and-family-
centred existence, growing pre-occupation with money and with
the acquisition of material possessions, trend towards
urbanization etc. Coupled with all this, is an increasing
concern with personal status instead of class solidarity, with
an emphasis on the welfare of the children and their future
hopes and aspirations.

This embourgeoisement of society in India has been
accompanied by its 'professionalization'. The 'specialist
type of man' stands out against the older type of 'cultivated
man'. A whole range of new occupations has emerged during the
last hundred years. This has happened because of the
irresistibly expanding bureaucratization of all public
and private relations of authority and by the ever-increasing
importance of expert and specialized knowledge. The advancement
of science and technology is also at work. Industrialization
is growing. Management and administration are becoming more and
more specialized. All this necessitates the existence of a class
of professional people who have specialized skills and knowledge
which are required to be certified through examinations.

9.2 Rise of Testocracy
The undercurrents of embourgeoisement and professionalization in
Indian society have laid the foundation for a new form of
social organization which we shall call 'testocracy'. In its
purest form it requires the society to regulate its affairs - including the determination of status, power and prestige - directly or indirectly on the basis of test results. It exists even in developed countries like the USA where they can decide who shall lead and who shall follow, who shall find a place among the professional and scientific elite and who shall be relegated to the status of blue and white collar worker on the basis of tests. The tests can indirectly affect where one's sons and daughters will eventually live, the kinds of mates they will marry, even the number of children they will have. Some would broaden the concept and treat the school itself as the means to provide access to higher steps in the social ladder. The level of studies completed, the level of examinations passed, the prestige of diplomas and academic degrees become the main factors on which professional success, careers and social success depend.

Testocracy resembles 'meritocracy' with the difference that merit is purported to be assessed through tests. The use

of tests is supposed to ensure considerable degree of fairness and justice in determining individual inequalities which are recognized.

When the British colonized India, we had a traditional society with agro-handicraft economy, feudal-dynastic polity and coparcenary personal law. People mostly lived in villages following a traditional way of life. Relationships between individuals and groups were governed not by contract but by status. Birth in a particular family and caste largely determined one's rights and duties. Relationships were also multiplex—the same people were involved with each other in several kinds of relationships.¹ The institutionalization of examinations by the British introduced an exotic factor into this situation which sowed the seeds of a mild form of testocracy in India.

As a matter of fact, the British, as such, had no intention of introducing meritocracy or testocracy in India. There is considerable evidence to show that to begin with they did not use meritocratic principles even in educational planning where perhaps they are the easiest to apply. On the contrary, they adopted 'downward filtration theory' according to which the upper classes of society were supposed to be educated first. They believed that the natural course of things in all countries seemed to be that knowledge

introduced from abroad should descend from the higher or educated classes and gradually spread through their example.\(^1\) They were also convinced that the improvements in education which most effectively contribute to elevate the moral and intellectual condition of a people were those which concern the education of higher classes of persons possessing leisure and natural influence over the minds of the countrymen.\(^2\) This was at the most a colonialist's justification for the promotion of education of the classes in preference to that of the masses. The theory was good for imperialistic designs but obviously did not subscribe to meritocratic principles. This just enabled them to argue that even if their efforts were limited only to the education of a class or classes at the top, education would, over time, spread automatically to the lower classes at a later stage.

While it may be agreed that the British had no interest in the introduction of testocracy in India, they did contribute to it through the institutionalization of examinations on the one hand and bureaucratization of procedures on the other. The middle and professional classes finding their salvation

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through testocratic ideals encouraged them further. Our submission here is that in India there is a symbiotic relationship between the rise in testocracy and the embourgeoisement of society. Examinations have helped in the growth of middle classes in India; and, in turn middle classes have encouraged the acceptability of testocratic ideas.

Some evidence of testocracy in operation in India is available in the extended use of test results by the bourgeoisie in such areas as matrimony. An idea about their effect on connubial relations can be had from the matrimonial columns of leading newspapers which are popular with the middle and rich classes. I made a countdown and categorization of the matrimonial advertisements in the city edition of The Hindustan Times (Delhi) for April 1980. The aim was to find out what proportion of them display or insist upon examinations passed for matrimonial negotiation, especially in relation to similar insistence upon caste considerations. During the month, 2383 matrimonial advertisements were inserted. They could be categorized as follows:

(A) Those which mentioned both caste and examination passed 1486
(B) Those which mentioned only caste 699
(C) Those which mentioned only examinations 230
(D) Those which mentioned neither 168

Category A where caste and examination considerations were
combined represented the most common approach. Some of the
advertisements in this category even indicated the distinction
secured in the examination. For example, one matrimonial read
as:

Match for 28 years, 178 cms, Khatri boy, M.Sc. (Gold Medalist)
scholarship holder, completing Ph.D shortly. Income four
figures. Brothers two, settled in USA. Only sister married.
Father retired gazetted officer running agriculture farm.

In category C, examination was the chief criterion; and even
if caste was mentioned, it was clearly indicated that there
would be no caste bar in the choice of the partner. In
category D, requirements other than either caste or examinations
appeared to weigh heavily. The main considerations in such
cases were age, physical handicap, previous marital status,
profession etc. This analysis clearly shows that caste is
still a force to reckon with in the matter of marriage even
in the classes that subscribe to matrimony through
newspapers. The performance in tests has been used by the
middle and upper classes not to replace caste considerations
but only to supplement them. People have not given up
endogamy but within a particular caste, test results affect
matrimony.

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1. The Hindustan Times (City Edition), Delhi, April 6, 1980.
9.3 The Triangular Contest

Thus, the Indian society is at present contending with more than one principle of social organization. On the traditional hereditary stratification on the basis of caste system have been superimposed the mutually conflicting principles of testocracy and democratic egalitarianism. Indeed, in no society is there only one method of securing status. However, since the three principles are not consistent with each other, we have a peculiar triangular contest. One reason why this conflict has emerged inexorably is the imported nature of testocracy and democracy. We can decry testocracy as much as V.V. John would decry parliamentary democracy as an imported model and assert that we have so far shied away from taking measures that would make the model work efficiently on our soil.¹ Misra also appears to be taking a similar stand in stating that the ideas and institutions of a middle-class order were imported into India. They did not grow from within. They were implanted in the country without a comparable development in its economy and social institutions.² This gives a clue to the sociological

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2. B.B. Misra, op.cit., p.11.
irrelevance of public examinations. But what is to be seen is how the triangular contest between three contending principles of social organization takes place.

The first part of the contest is the interaction between testocracy and democracy which has already been discussed in an earlier chapter. The major contradiction between the two takes the form of a democratic dilemma in which excellence clashes with equality. The society paradoxically cherishes egalitarianism but also motivates higher achievement and has evolved methods of assessing its inequalities.

The second part of the contest is the conflict between hereditary stratification and testocracy which are also mutually contradictory. They cannot be simultaneously applied; they cannot coexist. That is why, when testocracy is introduced in a stratified society, it leads to a peculiar phenomenon which can be aptly described by using Duncan's analogy of a race. He believes that a stratified society which places stress on achievement is not unlike a race in which the runners differ not only in skill and ability, but also in respect to various advantages or handicaps. Some begin the race with heavy packs upon their backs and many obstacles in their course, while others enjoy freedom from such impediments.¹ These 'packs'...

and obstacles are the sources of sociological tension. In India, a society that has for long used birth as the criterion for the assignment of status has suddenly come to have great interest in and respect for those whose ability, drive, aggressiveness or sheer luck enable them to come out on the top. It does not have charm for others. The latter may be individuals of lesser ability. They may be individuals whose excellence is not of the sort that society at a particular moment chooses to recognize. They may be individuals of lower motivation. Or they may simply lack the temperament that takes kindly to the knife edge of competitive tests. Such persons do not have any exhilaration for testocracy. There is thus a fear that if test results are important for determining social status and life-chances, these persons will use their social freedom to work against the system.

The seamy side of this tension reveals itself in the form of malpractices during examinations. Since test results would help the students in jumping the class barrier or even in holding on to the status inherited by birth, they do not mind resorting to unfair means. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the present investigator found through a survey of unfair means used in undergraduate examinations during 1972-3 that it is a universal phenomenon with nearly one per cent students reported to have used unfair means. More serious
than this is the forging of university degrees and school certificates, cases of which are sometimes reported in the newspapers. All this is only a reflection on the malfunctioning of testocracy in a stratified society.

The hard fact is that hereditary stratification in milder forms is stable and even psychologically less disturbing. It does not create winners and losers as does testocracy; even if the latter exist, they are not un-merited. A person born to low status in a fairly rigidly stratified society has a far more acceptable self-image than the person who loses out in a free competition of talent. In an older society, the humble member of the society can attribute his lowly status to God's will, to the ancient order of things, or to a corrupt and tyrannous government. But if a society sorts people out efficiently and fairly according to their gifts, the loser knows that the true reason for his lowly status is that he is not capable of being better. This is a bitter pill for any man.

This is what leads to tension at the personal level. Young also develops a similar point while discussing

1. The Indian Express, July 22, 1976.

the rise of meritocracy in England. According to him, when hereditary stratification is replaced by meritocracy, the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard. Men who have lost their self-respect are liable to lose their inner vitality and may only too easily cease to be either good citizens or good technicians. The common man is liable to sulk for his fig-leaf. But psychological support in case of failure is not a sufficient justification for perpetuating caste system or any other rigid social stratification. We are only trying to establish areas of personal and sociological tensions.

The third part of the contest is the conflict between hereditary stratification and democracy. The former is essentially institutionalized inequality which is transmitted through generations while the latter is premised on egalitarianism. The two obviously cannot coexist without creating stresses and strains. We try to overcome this situation by evolving the concept of the equality of opportunity. We assume that men are not equal in their native gifts nor in their motivations; and it follows that they will not be equal in their achievements. But because of egalitarianism we give them equal opportunity. It only means an equal chance to compete

1. Michael Young, op. cit., p. 87.
without compensating for inequalities which result from stratification. This obviously is not a sufficient sop for 'new egalitarianism' which Antony Flew\(^1\) feels is educationally more subversive than the old species. He terms it as the egalitarianism of outcome. For the new egalitarian, competition in any form is a bad word. It is more so because the outcomes are appraised through examinations. It is also pointed out that academic achievements are not the only or the most valuable varieties of human excellence. Everyone who has taught in a school, college or university can recall splendid individuals who could not do well on achievement tests as also those much less splendid who contrived to combine the winning of the highest academic honours with every kind of nastiness of character.

As a matter of fact, when a society gives up hereditary stratification, there are two ways in which it may deal with the dramatic individual differences in ability and performance that emerge. One is that of testocracy and the other of egalitarianism. Testocracy in its moderate forms is perfectly legitimate. It recognizes and nourishes merit so essential for the smooth and efficient functioning of society. But too much emphasis on it produces a rat race for positions and, as

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we have seen, considerable social tension when operating along side hereditary stratification.

Even within the bounds of law, extreme emphasis on performance as a criterion of status may foster an atmosphere of raw striving that results in brutal treatment of less able, or less vigorous, or less aggressive; it may wantonly injure those whose temperament or whose values make them unwilling to engage in performance rivalries; it may penalize those whose undeniable excellences do not add up to the kinds of performance that society at any given moment chooses to reward.¹

The second possibility of egalitarianism always had romantic associations. We feel like believing that we come equals in this world and equals shall we go out of it. In moderate form it is good to believe that men are equal in the possession of certain legal, civil and political rights. But if taken to the extreme, it would not be less worse than hereditary stratification. It is, after all, only its limiting case with just one stratum. If it is implemented in extreme form, no man can be regarded as better than another in any dimension and there would be no differences in status whatsoever. It may be the surest way of creating a society unrelieved by even the smallest eminence. Carried far enough, it means the lopping of any heads which come above dead level. It means committee rule, the

¹ John W. Gardner, op. cit., p.18.
individual smothered by the group. And it means the end of that striving for excellence which has produced mankind's greatest achievements.  

9.4 Attaining Sociological Equilibrium

This is a conflicting and a confusing sociological situation no doubt - a situation of sociological disequilibrium. If Indian society seems to have survived this, it is because it has learnt how to live with it. It has specified the areas of operation of different principles thereby reducing the conflict between them. A similar solution was evolved by some other societies as well. For example, there are American communities which are fairly stratified in the strictly social dimension of life, are relatively egalitarian in education and inclined to let the best man win in economic matters. In India too, we are still predominantly caste ridden in social matters. Although considerations in certain fields like matrimony are affected to some extent by performance in tests, decisions continue to be largely governed by caste affiliations - at least, they are seldom ignored. In the matter of employment and admissions to higher education testocracy seems to reign

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1. Ibid., p.15.
2. Ibid., p.21.
supreme, in spite of variations here and there. Equality has been given a constitutional status. It is, therefore, inevitable that egalitarianism should dominate in legal and civil matters. This trichotomous arrangement does not reduce the basic sociological irrelevance of examinations. This only demonstrates how Indian polity has risen to the occasion in meeting a difficult situation. This equilibrium has its share of optimism. No democracy can function effectively until it has gone a long way in dissolving systems of hereditary stratification - at least, in some important sectors. At the same time, no democracy can give itself over to extreme emphasis on individual performance and still remain a democracy - or to extreme egalitarianism and still retain its vitality. This is an eclectic approach to the resolution of the sociological contradictions, but real equilibrium will be restored only if these areas are delimited with finesse and conflicts within the areas are meticulously avoided.

We may look for a ray of hope in this blend of contradictory principles. If we are optimists, we may treat it as a healthy sign for the Indian Society. We can regard each component to be providing a check on others, so that a continuous contest between them keeps each one
of them from complete collapse. Gardner has, indeed come out with an amusing law of Instability in relation to such a situation. Perhaps the most significant thing that can be said about the contest among the three principles as it goes on today is that when any one of them moves into something approaching a dominating position, it creates conditions which work towards its own downfall. To put it another way, each principle in its extreme application is highly unstable and vulnerable. That is why, although testocracy, on the face of it seems to work against the caste system, it might have paradoxically saved it from killing itself under its own sins. There is still a debate in India as to whether caste is growing more important or less in social and political life. There is a clear evidence that social inequalities based on caste are much less important now than fifty years ago. But the debate continues and it tends to divert attention from new kinds of social inequality whose relations with caste in the traditional sense are neither direct nor very clear. These new graduations are growing to be an important feature of Indian Society, particularly among urban educated, professional groups.  

9.9 Potential for an Open Society

A fundamental characteristic of systems of stratification is

1. Ibid., 22.
the extent to which they are open or rigid. This would be determined by the opportunity available to move from one position to another in society. This is the question of social mobility. In a perfectly open society, every one's chance to locate the position most suitable for him is equal, restricted only by his relative suitability and preference for the position. Although suitability for a particular task is a function of native talent, neither birth, nor father's position, nor differential access to training, nor motivation would, in any way, impede the free flow of persons into their most suitable niches. By contrast, in a totally closed society, the social structure is frozen, so that once individuals are assigned to a place, usually at birth, they are unable to advance. In such a closed society, the allocation of individuals to positions is based on particularistic criteria, such as family membership, personal friendship or some other form of nepotism. But these are only theoretical formulations. There is no perfectly open society as there is no perfectly closed one. Most societies would fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

A person not too much obsessed with contradictions arising out of the triangular contest could see in it the

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1. Melvin M. Rumin, op.cit., p.87.
potential of opening out the Indian Society. But unfortunately this potential can seldom be fully realized because of testocracy's co-existence with hereditary stratification. A peculiar social dynamics comes in the way of full realization of openness even in areas where testocracy operates. While theoretically, we should expect both upward and downward mobilities in a contest situation, it makes downward mobility rather uncommon. The shape of things is not, therefore, much different from Young's meritocracy. Upper class parents with dull children do everything possible to hide their handicaps. They usually make up by their own frantic determination for any lack of will on the part of the children. For instance, they can buy places at private schools which cannot be secured purely on the basis of merit. They can spend, for the sake of stimulus, even more on books and travel than other people.¹ This combined pressure of home and school has the effect of producing persons who are not superficially too dull. The present tests would surely place them in positions of status. Therefore, when hereditary stratification coexists with testocracy, the former acts as a limiting force. In stratified societies, the amount of education received by a child, very often depends on his status in society. If he is born to rank and wealth, he has access to good education. If he is born to lower strata, he usually does not. This is not untrue of the present scene in India. The type of formal education system that we have, confirms and holds in place differences in status which are hereditarily determined, even though

¹ Michael Young, op.cit., p. 77
merit may have been recognized as the principal determinant of status. For instance, in Bengal the Brahmins, from very early days, were very forward in taking advantage of the new education. The list of graduates of the Calcutta University from 1858 to 1891 shows complete predominance of Brahmins, Vaidyas and Kayasthas in this field. Therefore, much of the optimism generated by testocracy is lost at the altar of stratification itself. All this would seem to suggest that while examinations appear to be a useful tool for ensuring social mobility, they can never be more than a tool. They will be used or not used, made to perform this task or that, in accordance with other prevailing factors, not the least of which would be will and philosophy of those in position to guide society.

9.6 Conclusion

In sum, what we have been trying to establish here is that India is one of the classic examples of a stratified society. Its fundamental structure has virtually remained unchanged for over three millennia. The sociological scene has been dominated by hereditary caste system. Although it withstanded the onslaught of Buddhism in 6th Century B.C. and of Bhakti movement more recently, it is now contending testocracy and democracy - two new principles of social organization.

The British had no intention of introducing testocracy in India but unwittingly they provided the necessary conditions through the institutionalization of examinations. Then there was also the increasing bureaucratization of procedures. Direct support to the growth of testocracy was provided by the bourgeoisie of Indian Society and its growing professionalization. Testocracy led to interactions with social stratification on the one hand and democracy, which had also entered the arena, on the other. It created its own tensions revealed by the use of unfair means in examinations or forging of certificates as also its paradoxes and dilemmas because of a clash between excellence and equality. Thus there came about a triangular contest between three competing principles: testocracy, democracy, and hereditary stratification. There is a confluence of contradictions which gives the impression of a sociological disequilibrium.

The response of Indian Society to this situation has been eclectic. An attempt has been made to bring about equilibrium by demarcating different areas for different principles. Hereditary stratification continues to dominate in social activities. Testocracy has been carrying the day in employment and admissions to higher education. Egalitarianism is theoretically fully implemented in legal and civil matters.

The contest has its brighter side too. Each principle provides a check on others ensuring not only proper limits
but also survival of each. Furthermore, although testocracy has in it the potentiality of establishing an open society, it fails because of the limits imposed by stratification. It is yet to be seen whether the generalization of Brian Holmes and Lauwere that the achievement or contest society slips back into the sponsored or ascription society would hold for India also.

PART IV
THE FINALS