

## **NATURE OF SOCIAL FORMATION IN INDIA: Analyzing D.D. Kosambi's Contribution**

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### **Abstract**

This paper delves into the nature of social formation in India through the interpretative lens of Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi's work. As a distinguished Marxist historian, Kosambi critiqued traditional Indian historiography, advocating for a methodological approach that combined textual analysis with field research. His insights into the Indian state's diversity and unity, the role of caste, and the multi-class nature of Indian society offer a nuanced understanding of India's socio-economic and political landscape. This research examines Kosambi's interpretations of modes of production, the tradition-modernity discourse, and the divergence between liberalism and democracy, highlighting the unique trajectory of Indian social formation characterized by adjustment rather than displacement.

### **Introduction**

D D Kosambi, a renowned Marxist historian, brought a critical perspective to the study of Indian history. His work emphasizes the methodological integration of textual findings and field research, informed by his scientific background. Kosambi's analysis of the Indian state, marked by its diversity and unity, provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and political fabric of India. Central to his work is the institution of caste, which he viewed as crucial for understanding socio-economic differences. This paper explores Kosambi's contributions to the interpretation of Indian social formation, focusing on his views on modes of production, tradition-modernity discourse, and the relationship between liberalism and democracy.

## Literature Review

Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi's seminal works, "An Introduction to the Study of Indian History" (1956) and "The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline" (1965), offer foundational insights into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of ancient India. Kosambi employs a Marxist perspective, integrating rigorous field research with textual analysis, to challenge traditional historiography and highlight the significance of caste as a socio-economic structure. His approach underscores the coexistence of diverse modes of production and the relative autonomy of the Indian state, devoid of a single dominant bourgeoisie class.

Kumkum Roy's (2007) article "Kosambi on Caste: Explorations in Historical Sociology" in the Economic and Political Weekly critically examines Kosambi's analysis of caste. Roy underscores Kosambi's identification of caste as central to understanding socio-economic differences in India and his exploration of the historical processes shaping caste structures. She emphasizes Kosambi's unique approach to linking caste with class, particularly his analysis of the Shudras as a dependent labor class.

A. Gudavarthy's (2012) "Re-Framing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society" builds on Kosambi's insights to explore the dynamics of democracy and political agency in India. Gudavarthy discusses the interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting the tensions and continuities in India's socio-political landscape. He critiques the assimilation policies of the contemporary Indian state, advocating for more inclusive approaches to democratization.

D. P. Chattopadhyaya's (1991) "Science and Society in Ancient India" situates Kosambi's work within a broader intellectual tradition that examines the intersection of science, society, and culture in ancient India. Chattopadhyaya underscores the methodological innovations introduced by Kosambi, particularly his use of scientific principles to analyze historical phenomena.

Irfan Habib's (2007) note in *Social Scientist*, "Understanding Kosambi," provides a concise overview of Kosambi's contributions to Indian historiography. Habib highlights Kosambi's

methodological rigor and his pioneering efforts to incorporate Marxist theory into the study of Indian history.

R. S. Sharma's (1980) "Indian Feudalism c. 300-1200" complements Kosambi's work by providing an in-depth analysis of the feudal structures in ancient India. Sharma's examination of feudalism aligns with Kosambi's emphasis on the coexistence of multiple modes of production and the absence of a singular dominant class, offering a broader context for understanding the socio-economic dynamics of ancient India.

Together, these works provide a comprehensive overview of Kosambi's contributions to the study of Indian history, highlighting his innovative methodological approach and his insights into the socio-economic and cultural structures that have shaped India through the ages.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing Kosambi's writings and interpretations of Indian history. Primary sources include Kosambi's published works and secondary sources such as scholarly articles and critiques of his theories. The study synthesizes Kosambi's methodological approach, combining textual analysis with insights from field research. By examining the socio-economic and political context of pre-independent and post-independent India, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Kosambi's contributions to the study of Indian social formation.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Diversity and Unity in the Indian State**

Kosambi's work highlights the Indian state's paradoxical nature, characterized by two mutually contradictory yet striking features of 'Diversity and Unity'. The bases of differences among people arise from the cultural distinctions, traditional preferences and revolve around 'caste' lines which is an institution central to Kosambi's work on Indian state. Kosambi conceptualized caste as a structure to understand socio-economic differences and examined the

contestation, constitution as well as consolidation of caste identities. He further identified that the only reason for the functional nature of democracy in India and its survival owed to the non-existence of one dominant class which gave the state some sense of relative autonomy. However, there have been more than one bourgeoisie class in India but none has been able to establish supremacy and therefore the state still has an effective authority without the interference from the bourgeoisie.

The pre independent Indian state was characterized mainly by poverty and lack of educational as well as economic opportunities therefore the institutions of finance, bureaucratic administration, machine production in a factory and the very idea of science were alien concepts to the majority of the population and this was the reason why the handful majority with decent knowledge about the following concepts and decent economic backgrounds led to the emergence of Indian bourgeoisie, however divided by language, regional history and other such differences, grouped by similarity of interests in two sections: The real bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. Finance and mechanized factory production were in the hands of the real bourgeoisie whereas the distribution of products was dominated by the petty bourgeoisie class of shopkeepers. Even the agrarian surplus was in the hands of middlemen and money lenders. This domination didn't confine itself to the social and economic platforms but also extended its reach to the political sphere with a class of professionals and clerical workers as the connecting link between the legislatures as well as the machinery of administration. The deprivation of the Western idea of development for the mostly backward Indian population can be accounted for the rise of these two dominant bourgeoisie classes in Kosambi's view.

## MODES OF PRODUCTION

Kosambi's understanding of Indian economy was essentially Marxist but distinct from traditional Marxian Philosophy of class dominance. The first reason that can be accounted for the same is that CLASS as a CATEGORY was never fully observed in the India's context because class as a category needs to be separated from culture and driven only by interest. Culture, however, remains an inseparable feature of Indian social life and therefore is reflected in each and every sphere. Secondly, the traditional Marxian Model identifies with the presence of two

dominant classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariats where the former exploited the latter for the sole purpose of profit generation by exploiting the latter and also having the ownership of means of production but in the Indian case, Class was not as highly demarcated as caste and no bourgeoisie class was dominant enough to own and control the means of production for their interests. Thirdly, the presence of more than one bourgeoisie class in India also reduces the possibility of domination by one class because of conflict in interests. And lastly, there wasn't even a distinct working or labor class organized into unions as Marxist Capitalism states which in turn gives a distinct color to Indian Economy and capitalist modes of production.

In India, the capitalist mode of production was introduced by the Colonial Rule but failed to replace the already existing modes. So, even with the introduction of new modes of production coming to fore, the older feudal modes were not destroyed but rather in congruence with the newly introduced modes and can be attributed with a sense of adjustment. The reason for the same is the non-emergence of any bourgeoisie revolution which could possibly create massive class divide. Furthermore, India happened and still happens to be a MULTICLASS SOCIETY, which implies that no single class becomes hegemonic and this in turn led to co-existence of MULTIMODES of PRODUCTION.

#### TRADITION-MODERNITY DISCOURSE

Kosambi's work addresses the interplay between tradition and modernity in India as Dr. Gudavarthy calls it, an unholy marriage between tradition and modern in India, which signifies the nature of tension as well as continuity between the modern and traditional. The advent of modernity in India, introduced by colonial rule, did not replace existing modes of production but coexisted with them, leading to an adjustment rather than displacement. This continuity between tradition and modernity is marked by tension but also reflects India's ability to uphold diversity across different temporal and spatial zones. The emergence of bourgeoisie and upper middle classes during colonial rule led to a form of modernity characterized by capitalist modes of production, while tradition remained omnipresent in social life, impacting social relations. This modernity also is characterized by the emergence of the bourgeoisie as well as the upper middle classes and in a country like India, the people were deprived of the Western idea of development because of

backwardness and hence the modern institutions which had been erected for their welfare of these indigenous people, only the newly constituted bourgeoisie was enjoying the benefits of these modern institutions. The rural poor were driven by the famine conditions in the jungle to become the cheapest form of drudge labor in the city. This is a critique of the modernity that was inflicted upon the mostly illiterate, agricultural peasants, tribal and locals with little or no source of earning livelihoods and therefore had to indulge in the labor market and sell their labor at meager wages. In the Indian context, modernity was observed through Capitalism but tradition was omnipresent in social life; in villages, territory or local spaces, therefore impacting social relations.

#### DIVERSION BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Kosambi also explored the concepts of liberalism and democracy, products of modernity in India. The inception of the Indian state is attributed to cultural origins with historical and traditional roots, but modernity introduced Western concepts of liberalism and democracy. These concepts were not entirely alien, as certain dynasties had practiced republics. Post-independence, India adopted a liberal democratic setup to manage its diversity inclusively. However, in contemporary times, a diversion between liberalism and democracy is observed, with democratization leading to policies of assimilation rather than inclusion, creating tensions between liberal methods and democratic practices.

The gap between the socially stratified Indian society on the basis of caste finds as Kumkum Roy mentions in her work on Kosambi gives ample evidence of structural elements of caste and his more detailed investigations of the specific processes that shaped the structure over time. Caste assumed a certain centrality in this quest and to establish an equation between the caste and class was through his analysis of the category of Shudras, arguing that this social group initially equated with the DASA, or slaves maintained by the community, visualized the shudra as constituting a class of more or less dependent laborers with virtually no access to productive resources. Unfortunately, the kind of atrocities that the Indian society has been inflicting upon the shudras with the hierarchical superiority of the Brahmanas had to be reversed after independence

and therefore, the inclusive policies were adopted in order for ample representation to the long deprived castes and backward classes who are now being exploited economically in the labor market by the capitalists but still have the agency of the government to regard and uphold their equal status as citizens of the society, backing them up with legal framework of rights and laws formulated in the direction to curb inequalities based on social evils.

## CONCLUSION

Kosambi's work provides a profound understanding of the nature of social formation in India, emphasizing adjustment rather than displacement. His analysis highlights the coexistence of multiple modes of production and the multi-class nature of Indian society. The tradition-modernity discourse in India reflects a unique trajectory, where modern institutions coexist with traditional social structures. Kosambi deemed the liberal democracy model suitable for India, advocating for inclusive policies to protect the rights of marginalized classes. His contributions offer valuable insights into the complexities of Indian social formation, underscoring the importance of cultural and historical contexts in understanding socio-economic and political developments.

Kosambi not only recognized the bases of division of society and labor being the institution of caste but also stated that to effectively manage a country like India, it is extremely important to have a brief understanding of the cultural origins of the Indian state and how modernity did not mark a discontinuity from the traditional roots of Indian civilization, however uncertain this relationship might seem but it has seemed to work for India, unlike the patterns observed in Europe which completely broke off the traditional roots and adopted the modernity route or even Japan for that matter, which undertook industrialization under a national, indigenous bourgeoisie without foreign occupation. India had to take the middle path so as to give a sense of inclusivity to all the existing castes and classes in order to maintain a liberal environment recognizing everybody as citizens irrespective of their social preferences. With the brief understanding of Kosambi's work on nature of Indian State, it can conclusively be said that the nature of social formation in India is marked by ADJUSTMENT and not DISPLACEMENT, which means that the newly introduced modes of production in economic terms as well as the diversely stratified society on the basis of caste followed the trend not of displacing the older existing feudal modes but adjusting and

coopting it with the existing order therefore upholding the basic characters of liberal democracy of bringing every citizen under the umbrella of unity with only the government as the relatively autonomous institution with the central concept of state being the welfare type. Also, the continuity of modernity with tradition is also a feature unique to the Indian social formation since despite the westernization of institutions as well as economy, or academics, there was never a break from the traditional origins that India has which is also attributed by the prevalence of diverse cultures and cultural attitudes being central to social life and society as a whole. Kosambi deemed the liberal democracy model fit for a country like India to give due representation to the classes that had been wronged and neglected for centuries and needed the state as an institution to protect their rights as citizens against exploitation by the Capitalist bourgeoisie. Assimilation policy is incompetent since it creates a sense of identity crisis among the minorities and therefore inclusivity should be given preference.

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