

Changing Rural India: Caste and Social Mobility

Inaugural seminar with Gopal Karanth,
Visiting ICCR Professor at Lund University

Thursday 6 October 2011, at 15.00

Venue: Edens hörsal, Paradisgatan 5, Lund

The Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET) and the Department of Sociology, Lund University have the pleasure to invite you to the inaugural seminar of Gopal Karanth, Professor of Sociology from the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) in Bangalore, India.

Prof. Karanth holds the Visiting Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) Professorship at Lund University during the academic year 2011/12. He is being hosted by the Department of Sociology.



Programme:

- 15.00 Welcome addresses:
Professor Per Eriksson, Vice Chancellor Lund University
Professor Staffan Lindberg, Department of Sociology
Dr. Anna Lindberg, Director SASNET
- 15.10 Speech by H.E. Mr. Ashok Sajjanhar
Ambassador of India to Sweden and Latvia
- 15.30 Inaugural Lecture by Professor Gopal Karanth, on
"Changing Rural India: Caste and Social Mobility"
- 16.30 Cultural programme: Performance by renowned Indian Tabla player
Subrata Manna, classical singer Sudokshina Manna,
and Kathak dancer Sohini Debnath, all from Kolkata, India.
- 17.00 Indian vegetarian food will be served outside the hall.

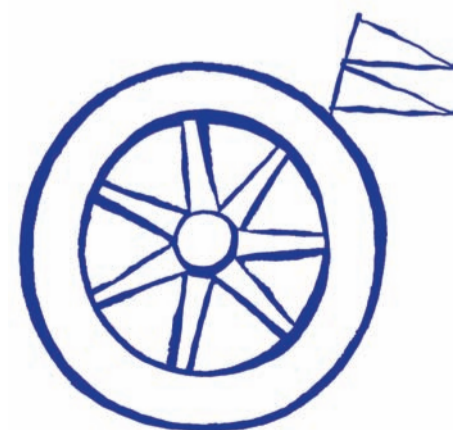
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Changing Rural India - Caste and Social Mobility

Abstract:

Most texts on Indian society have averred that the nexus between individual and society in India was mediated historically by the caste system. This nexus was perceived to be so strong that almost all historians and students of Indian society tended to define Indian society to be a caste society, and that without a caste lens it would be futile to understand it. Yet, by the turn of Twentieth century, scholars in India had begun to witness and describe the declining influence of caste and a caste system. Just as scholars engaged in analysing social change are coming to terms with its nature and direction, scholars studying caste are yet to arrive at a unambiguous understanding of the nature and direction of change.

Based on sociological studies of rural livelihood systems, primarily in southern Indian states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, this seminar is an attempt to describe the nature of social change in caste as relational identities of people. Castes in the absence of hierarchies have tended to 'broad-base' themselves by amalgamating with several other castes with similar cultural traits. In relation to the state, they have tended to become units of self-labelling entities in the more recent times, somewhat similar to what Fenton (2003: 70-71) refers to as 'circumstantial ethnicities' or as Safran (2008) refers to as *ethnonyms*.

The focus is to examine the fate of caste, especially after the *decline of hierarchy* of castes. What then is the status of caste in everyday lives of rural people? What are the emerging identities and what is the nature of relationship between such identities with the hitherto identity of caste? Has there been a disappearance of the patron-client system of relations, now that caste is no longer the same, or has something else taken the place of caste in determining the emerging patron-client relations? Has the pursuit of social mobility now found a new, caste-free *mantra*? Sociologists and social anthropologists in/of India have argued that there is a clear evidence caste is maintaining and perhaps even strengthening its hold over *certain areas* of life, there is also fairly convincing evidence of a *steady decline of its hold over several other areas* of it. Which are the areas in which caste is gaining a stronghold, and areas in which it is losing ground? Are we ready for a new definition of caste, and a new vocabulary to describe its operation in the lives of individuals, of state and civil society in India? The seminar proposes to address some of these questions.

Professor G K Karanth