

2nd Sem
GE-2

GE-2: SOCIOLOGY OF INDIA

2. Social Institutions and Practices

2.1 CASTE

Caste is a system of social stratification. It lies at the roots of Indian social structure. It involves ranking according to birth and determines one's occupation, marriage and social relationships. There is a prescribed set of norms, values and sanctions which govern social behaviour within caste.

Definition of Caste The word is derived from the Latin word 'Custus', which means 'pure'. The Portuguese word 'Casta' which means race, lineage or pure stock. But 'Caste' was not used in its Indian sense till the seventeenth century. The Indian use is the leading one now, and it has influenced all other uses. As the Indian idea of caste was but vaguely understood, this word was loosely applied to the hereditary classes of Europe resembling the caste of India, who keep themselves socially distinct. The Portuguese used this word to denote the Indian institution, as they thought such a system was intended to keep purity of blood. On one hand the learner is used to describe in the broadest sense the total system of social stratification, peculiar to India, on the other hand, it is used to denote four more or less distinct aspects of this total system. i.e. varna, jati and got. 150 Careless use of the English word 'caste' has been the source of considerable confusion. Manu distinctly says that there are only four varnas, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra & there is no fifth varna, while he admits of over fifty jatis.

Varna, according to Manu are four divisions into which the castes are grouped. But later scholars point out that even Manu confuses jati with varna. The confusion is due to the fact that the Brahmin can be called both a varna and jati. According to Risley, "a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor; human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give opinions as forming a singly homogenous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside that circle, but within the circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous". Ketkar defines a caste as a social group having two characteristics: 1) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born. 2) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of such groups has a special name by which it is called. Several of such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are but subdivisions of groups still larger which have independent names.

Béteille has defined caste, 'as a small and named group of persons characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system'. Majumdar & Madan define caste thus: "If a number of people constitute a group not because of physical togetherness but because they have some common interests and common ways to doing things, as a consequence of which stratification of society into higher and lower group emerges, then there groups may be called as status groups. If a status group is open to entry, that is, if anybody can become its member by fulfilling certain prerequisite conditions, like obtaining a degree, or paying an admission fee, or earning a particular income, then the status group may be called a class. If the recruitment is not free, that is, if a status group is not open to any body, but only those are its members who have certain ascribed, attributes, which cannot be acquired by other, then it is called a caste."

Bouglé, the French writer, concludes that the caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: 1) separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); 2) division of labour, each group having, is theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only

with certain limits; 3) and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

Sociologists have defined caste (locally referred to as "jati") as 'hereditary, endogamous group, which is usually localised. It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and general maximum commensality that occurs within the caste" (Srinivas 1962). This is the definition of the ideal form of caste system. In reality, however, there are variations in the structure and functioning of caste system.

It is imperative to make a distinction between the theoretical formulation of caste system and its existential reality. Theoretically, caste stratification of the Indian society has its origin in the Varna system. This system literally means colour which was prevalent during the Vedic period. According to this doctrine of colour, the Hindu society was divided into four main Varnas : Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. A fifth category of untouchables lie outside the fold of the varna scheme. This was mainly based on division of labour and occupation. Members of each varna performed different functions like the priestly function rulers, fighters, traders and servile. The varna system is important because it provides an all-India macro structural scheme within which innumerable variations of castes are found. A varna may include different castes which may be divided into different sub-castes.

The concept of Varna is generally traced to the *Purusha Sukta* Verse system of the Rig Veda. It said that Varna system originated by the sacrifice of the primeval being or Purusha. After the sacrifice, the Brahmana emerged from the mouth, the Kshatriya from arms, the Vaishya from thighs, and the Sudra from the feet. Thus, the four Varnas that emerged were considered to have a divine origin.

FEATURES OF CASTE SYSTEM

Ghurye (1962) an eminent sociologist, identified six features of caste system.

These six features are:

4.2.1 Segmental Division of Society

The Hindu society is divided into different castes. Caste membership is determined by birth and not by selection and accomplishments. Hence, caste status is termed as being ascribed (by birth).

4.2.2 Hierarchy

Caste system has a specific scheme of social preference in which they are arranged in a social and ritual hierarchy. A sense of high and low, superiority and inferiority is associated with this gradation or ranking. The Brahmins are placed at the top of the hierarchy and are regarded as ritually pure or supreme. The untouchables, considered most impure, are at the lowest rung of the hierarchy. In between are the Kshatriyas, followed by the Vaishya. Thus, castes occupy a specific status in the overall framework of caste hierarchy.

4.2.3 Restrictions on Feeding and Social Interaction

Rules are laid down which govern the exchange of food which is also called

commensality and social interaction between different castes. There are restrictions on the kind of food that can be eaten together, received or exchanged among castes. A Brahmin will accept "pakka" food, i.e., food prepared in 'ghee' from any community but he cannot accept 'kachcha' food i.e food prepared in water at the hands of other caste. Concept of pollution places severe restrictions on the extent of social interaction.

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4.2.4 Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges of Different Caste Sections

Each caste is considered to be more pure or impure than the other in the ritual sense of the term. The ideology of pollution and purity regulates the relationship between different castes significantly. There are several taboos practised by the superior castes to preserve their ceremonial purity.

Castes considered ritually impure were subjected to manifold disabilities. For example, they were forbidden to use public roads, public well or enter Hindu temples. The shadow of some castes were considered polluting, such as, in Tamil Nadu the Shanars or Toddy-tappers had to restrict their pace away to 24 steps from a Brahmin during the earlier times.

Each caste has its own customs, traditions, practices and rituals. It has its own informal rules, regulations and procedures.

4.2.5 Restrictions on Marriage

Endogamy or marriage within one's own caste or sub-caste is an essential feature of caste system. Generally, people get married within their own caste or subcaste. However, there were a few exceptions. In some regions of India, the upper caste men could marry lower caste women. This kind of marriage alliance is known as hypergamy.

4.2.6 Lack of Unrestricted Choice of Occupation

Traditionally each caste was associated with an occupation. They were ranked higher and lower on the basis of ritual purity and pollution of their associated occupation. The Brahmins who occupied the uppermost rank were prescribed the duties of acquiring and teaching sacred knowledge and of performing sacrifices.

The above is a description of the essential features of caste system. However caste structure has several variations as found in its functioning in different regions of India. As a regional reality, one can see different patterns of caste-ranking, customs and behaviours, marriage rules and caste dominance.

Each caste had its own caste council or panchayat where the grievances of its caste members were heard. Caste panchayat was regulating the behaviour of the caste people according to the prescribed norms and sanctioned social behaviour. Headed by the elders of that caste, these councils had the power to excommunicate a member if he did not follow caste restrictions. They are distinct from village *panchayats* in that the latter, as statutory bodies, serve all villagers regardless of caste, although they operate on the same principles

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY WITHIN CASTE SYSTEM

By definition, caste system is viewed as a rigid and closed system of stratification. That is there is no movement or mobility from one caste status to the other. Social mobility is the process by which individuals or groups move, either upwards or downwards, from one social status to another in the social hierarchy. In reality, social mobility has been an important feature of caste system. This clearly means that caste system is a dynamic reality with flexibility in terms of its structure and function.

The concept of Sanskritisation which is basically a process of social mobility was developed by M N Srinivas to describe the dynamic nature of the caste system. In his path-breaking study, Religion and society among the Coorgs (1952), M N Srinivas explained caste mobility in terms of cultural emulation of the

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Brahmins or other dominant castes by the local lower castes. He defined Sanskritisation as "a process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, frequently "twice-born" caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community." William Rowes' study of the Noniya in Senapur village in eastern Uttar Pradesh shows the success of a middle level caste in acquiring upward mobility through Sanskritisation after achieving economic prosperity. A clear example of Sanskritisation is the emulation of the practice of "twice-born castes" such as, vegetarianism by those so-called "lower castes". This paved way for mobility to occur within caste system. However, lower castes aspiring to climb upwards in caste hierarchy have to face hostility from the higher castes.

Along with Sanskritisation, the process of Westernisation has also made social mobility possible. Westernisation refers to all cultural changes and institutional innovations in India as it came into political and cultural contact with the western nations especially British. It includes establishment of scientific, technological and educational institutions, rise of nationalism, new political culture and leadership in the country. Many higher castes gave up traditional customs and adopted the life style of the westerners.

The process of industrialisation and urbanisation (migration of people from villages to cities) affected caste structure to a great extent. Industrial growth provided new sources of livelihood to people and made occupational mobility possible. With new transportation facilities, there was frequent communication. People of all castes travelled together and there was no way to follow the prevalent ideology of ritual purity and pollution between castes. Taboos against food sharing started weakening when industrial workers from different castes lived and worked together.

Urbanisation and growth of cities also changed the functioning of the caste system. Kingsley Davis (1951) held that the anonymity, congestion, mobility, secularism and changeability of the city makes the operation of the caste virtually impossible. Ghurye (1961) holds that changes in the rigidities of the caste system were due to the growth of city life. M N Srinivas (1962) holds that due to the migration of

Brahmins to the towns, the non-Brahmins refused to show same respect to them which they showed before, and inter-caste eating and drinking taboos were also weakened. Quite significantly, the superiority of the Brahmins has been challenged, once considered a religious dogma and was based on birth, is no more so, as it was in the past.

Besides industrialisation and urbanisation, other factors which emerged after Independence in the country significantly affected the caste system. Various political and economic policies and reforms were initiated after Independence in the country which led to several changes after Independence. The socio-religious reforms and movements, merger of some states spread of modern education, growth of modern profession, spatial mobility and the spread of market economy accelerated the process of modernisation and development. Consequently, changes and the process of social mobility in the caste system gained momentum.

There were occupational opportunities which were ritually neutral. Entry into these new occupations were based on the technical skills imparted through modern

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education. When people from different castes came together in modern Caste occupational settings and had close interaction, it gave a serious blow to the ritual, heredity and hierarchical structure and aspects of caste.

Under the caste system, endogamy was the basis of mate-selection. The members of a caste or sub-caste were forbidden by non changing social laws to marry outside the group. But at present the Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 have removed restrictions of endogamy and declared intercaste marriages as legally valid. Of late, several factors such as impact of western philosophy, co-education, working together of males and females of different castes in the same factory or office have contributed to an increase in the cases of inter-caste marriages, love-marriages and late-marriages and live-in-relationship. Ram Krishna Mukherjee (1958) stated that both the economic aspect (change in occupational specialisation) and the social aspect (adoption of higher caste customs, giving up polluting professions, etc.) of the caste system, have vastly changed the caste system. He said that change is more specific in urban areas where rules on social interaction and, caste commensalities have relaxed and civil and religious disabilities of lower castes have been lifted. There are scholars of the viewpoint that changes are taking place gradually within the caste system but they are not disintegrative of the system as a whole. Ghurye (1961) was of the opinion that caste has shed some of its features. He said, that "caste no longer rigidly determines an individual's occupation but continues to prescribe its norms about marriage within the caste. One still has to depend very largely on one's caste for help at critical periods of one's life, like marriage, birth and death." He believed that strength of the caste system in social life is as strong today as it was earlier. Although Andre Beteille has referred to the changes taking place in the caste system in terms of its structural distance between castes, style of life, commensality and endogamy. Scholars have also said that caste has lost its traditional elements of purity and pollution and became more of an identity group. (Sharma, K)

4.4.1 Caste and Politics

The phenomenon of dominance of one caste over the other was an important factor in the maintenance of the caste system. Traditionally, economic and political dominance coincided with the ritual dominance. According to Srinivas (1966) a caste is said to be dominant when it is numerically the strongest in the village or local area and it economically and politically exercises a great influence. Such factors combine to place a particular caste group in a position of political dominance.

Sociologists have undertaken political analysis in terms of caste and traced the political development of caste through time. They have analysed the role of caste and its linkage to politics to gain political power. The system of parliamentary democracy, adult franchise, democratic decentralisation and the system of Panchayati Raj have taken politics down to the grassroots level where caste becomes a prominent variable in electoral politics. The demands of organised party system in politics have brought about a coalition of castes. The caste-based politics has promoted caste and importance of caste in politics. The caste has been the mobilizing, as well as, the unifying factor for political gains, material welfare, social status and caste alliances. (See Kothari, R. (ed.) 1970: *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Langman, New Delhi)

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The modern political system is universal by the Constitution and it does not take into account the caste factor in privilege but in practice, on the ground level, caste considerations have come to occupy a predominant position in the democratic political process. The Political consciousness on caste lines is evident in references made to caste sabhas or caste associations and their role in Indian politics and political mobilisation.

Rajni Kothari has examined the relationship between caste and politics. He found the factors of education, government patronage and expanding franchise have penetrated the caste system, affecting the democratic politics in the country. The Economic opportunity, administrative patronage rising consciousness, is changing social attitudes Recognition of new opportunities and the rising consciousness and aspirations have drawn caste into politics and political mobilisation.

The different parties and movements mobilise caste based status groups as resources for their political interest. Very often candidates are fielded by political parties on the basis of their caste identity. The caste provides a readymade system of mobilization and support for the organised party politics. There are various caste federations which provide an organised political platform to fight for their common course. For example, the Kshatriya Sabha of Gujarat is an illustration of an active caste federation. It consists of clusters of castes or Jatis, that functions like a caste-based political community. Thus, caste is a factor of political significance and it is closely interlinked with politics.

4.4.2 Measures to Prohibit Caste Discrimination

After Independence the spread of education and social reform movements played a significant role in emancipation of socially and economically backward castes and classes. It is through them and various other legal constitutional measures the discrimination based on caste and other factors was prohibited. Our

Constitution is based on democratic values of equality, liberty and fraternity. It does not allow any discrimination. In order to fulfil the Constitutional mandate, several Acts were passed in the Parliament to end the exploitative and discriminatory practices against lower castes. The government of India has enacted laws to remove untouchability. It has also brought in many reforms to improve the quality of life of the weaker sections of society. Some of them are:

- i) the Constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights;
- ii) the Abolition of 'untouchability' in 1950;
- iii) the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and
- iv) the Provision of reservation in educational institutions, employment and other opportunities;
- v) the establishment of the department of Social Welfare and National Commissions for the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955, renamed as Protection of Civil Rights Act, in 1976.

The SC & ST Act, 1989 is one of the important measures to check, deter and prevent activities against them. There is also an Act, 2013 for the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation. This Act aims to prohibit the employment of manual scavenging, the manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks without protective equipment, and the construction of unhygienic Caste latrines. The Act seeks to rehabilitate manual scavengers and seeks to provide alternative employment to them.

The Constitution of India provides measures for protective discrimination under various articles to facilitate the process of creating an equalitarian society. The Constitution gives preferential treatment to Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. Thus reservation was a strategy to give them a share in power, politics, services, employment and in order to uplift them socially and economically. In 1950, the Constitution provided 12.5% reservation for SCs and 5% for STs but later in 1970, it was raised to 15% for SCs and 7.5% for STs. The reservation was provided in jobs, admission to educational institutions and central and state legislative assemblies. Accordingly, all state governments enacted laws to provide reservation for the SCs and STs in services and other areas in the state. There is special provision for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) made in the Constitution of India wherein the term OBC is used for them. Article 15(4) of the Constitution refers to them as 'socially and educationally backward classes of citizens'. Article 340, refers to them as 'socially and educationally backward classes'. Article 16(4) refers to them only as 'backward class of citizens'. Article 46 refers to them as 'educationally and economically weaker sections of the people'. These are several provisions laid down in different Articles in our Constitution for the advancement of Other Backward Classes or OBCs.

However, the issue of reservation is more complex, particularly at the all India level. The ground reality has shown many of the measures are not effective in improving the condition of the poor and deprived. The issue of criteria of reservation is, therefore, raised again, and again. There is the need for its assessment and policy formulation from time to time.

in the first instance on the basis of the nature of the conditions existing
before and after the occurrence of the change and have been shown to actually be
made all such it is desirable that there be not the change of conditions
without any other cause.

The next is to identify the fact of the preceding particularly in the case of
the other cases where it is necessary to the fact of complete absence of interest
and other groups. However, there is a general quality of other groups, the
probability being changed and so there are elements of continuity. The next
step is to identify the fact of the preceding particularly in the case of
the other cases where it is necessary to the fact of complete absence of interest