

Lecture 23: Caste System in India

In this lecture, we shall discuss the basic features of caste system and concepts such as sanskritization, westernization and the dominant caste.

The word, 'caste' is of Spanish and Portuguese origin. The term, 'caste' originated from the Spanish word 'casta', meaning 'lineage' or 'race' or 'a group having hereditary quality'. It is derived from the Latin word 'Custus', which means pure. The Spaniards were the first to use it, but its Indian application is from the Portuguese, who had so applied it in the middle of the fifteenth century. The current spelling of the word is after the French word 'Caste', which appears in 1740 in the academies, and is hardly found before 1800. Before that time it was spelt as 'cast'. In the sense of race or breed of man it was used as early as 1555 AD. The Spanish word 'Casta' was applied to the mixed breed between Europeans, Indians (American) and Negroes. But 'caste' was not used in its Indian sense till the 17th century. The Indian use is the leading one now, and it has influenced all other uses.

Caste can be defined as hereditary endogamous group, having a common name, common traditional occupation, common culture, relatively rigid in matters of mobility, distinctiveness of status and forming a single homogeneous community. However, in the changing situation caste has adapted too many new features like having formal organizations, becoming less rigid and having a link with politics. Thus we may list from the above the following features of caste system.

1. **Hereditary in nature:** It implies that caste system is based on heredity. It is based on ascribed values rather than achieved qualities.
2. **Segmental division of society:** It means Indian social stratification is largely based on caste. There are various castes having a well-developed life style of their own. The membership of a caste is determined by birth. Thus caste is hereditary in nature.
3. **Hierarchy:** It indicates various castes according to their purity and impurity of occupations are ranked from higher to lower positions. It is like a ladder where pure caste is ranked on the top and impure is ranked at the bottom. For example the occupation of Brahmin is that of performing rituals and teaching. It is considered to be the purest occupation; hence they are placed at the top of the hierarchy. On the other hand sweeper, whose occupation is cleaning and scavenging, is placed at the bottom the bottom of the hierarchy because of impure occupation.
4. **Restrictions on food, drink and smoking:** Usually different castes do not exchange food and drink, and do not share smoking of hukka among them. For instance, Brahmins do not take food from any other caste. It is a complicated process. For example in Uttar Pradesh, among Kanyakubj Brahmins, there are many sub-divisions. Each sub-division does not take food from other sub-

- division. There are two types of food: ‘pucca’ (food prepared in ghee like puri, kachodi and pulao) and kuchcha (food prepared in water like rice, pulses and vegetable curries). Some castes exchange only pucca food among themselves. Invariably, the high caste does not take anything from the low caste. The same principle is applied to smoking.
5. **Endogamy:** It indicates members of the caste have to marry within their own caste only. Inter-castes marriages are prohibited. However, among educated people, particularly in the urban areas, inter-castes marriages are gradually increasing.
 6. **Purity and pollution:** It is one of the important features of the caste system. Purity and pollution are judged in terms of deeds, occupation, language, dress patterns, as well as food habits. For example liquor consumption, consuming non-vegetarian food, eating left-over food of the high castes, working in occupations like leather craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and carrying garbage etc. are supposed to be impure. However, in recent times some high caste people are today doing all the above jobs, like working in a shoe-shop, shoe-factory, cutting hair in a beauty parlour etc.
 7. **Occupational association:** Each caste has a specific occupation and cannot change the occupation. For instance, Brahmins do priesthood and teaching, Kayasthas maintain revenue records and writing. Baniyas are engaged in business and Chamars are engaged in leatherwork, etc. With new job opportunities available due to industrialization and urbanization some people have shifted from their traditional occupation. However, in rural areas traditional occupations are still followed. Such cases are also found in urban areas like a barber has a hair-cutting saloon where he cuts hair in the morning and evening simultaneously works as peon in some office.
 8. **Social and religious disabilities and privileges of a few sections:** The lower caste are debarred from doing many things like they are not permitted to enter the temple, do not use literally language and can not use gold ornaments or umbrella etc. However, thing have changed considerably, these restrictions are hardly found today.
 9. **Distinction in custom, dress and speech:** Each caste has distinct style of life, i.e. having its customs, dress patterns and speech. The high caste use pure language (sometimes use literally words), whereas, the low caste use colloquial language.
 10. **Conflict resolving mechanisms:** The caste’s having their own conflict resolving mechanisms such as Caste Panchayats at the village and inter-village levels.

Difference between Varna and Jati

As mentioned earlier there are four Varnas. The first mention of Varna is found in Rig-Veda, i.e. in the vedic era around 1500 BC. Varna means colour. Initially there were no untouchables. The Varna system was relatively not rigid during the Vedic era (1500BC-1000BC). During the later Vedic era, i.e. around 1000BC there has been a mention of “Asat Shudra” (untouchable community). Thus untouchability started around 1000BC. Around 2nd century BC to 1st century AD, because of diversified occupations, several occupational groups emerged and came to be known by different Jatis. Thus Varna Vyavastha is the textual model or book view of Indian social system, i.e. it is found today only in texts. Whereas, Jati is the contextual view or field view of Indian social system, i.e. we find Jatis in reality today and not Varnas. There are only four Varnas whereas, there are about 4000 Jatis. In each region about 200 jatis are found. The Varna had a Pan-Indic hierarchy, i.e. Brahmins are on the top, Kshatriyas are at the second position, Vaishyas are at the third position and Shudras are found in the bottom of the hierarchy. The hierarchy was uniform throughout India but in Jati a uniform hierarchy throughout India is not found. In the changing situation, in some areas Brahmins are on the top, in some other areas Thakurs (Rajput) are at the top. Today even the Dalits are found on the top in some areas. Thus secular criteria (economic and political) are found in the Jati system. On the other hand in Varna vyavastha ritual criteria (religious) is found. In Varna vyavastha initially untouchable are not found. They are placed outside the Varna vyavastha, whereas, in the Jati vyavastha untouchables are an integral part of the system. In Varna vyavastha one can change one’s status with improved socio-economic condition. Thus, one should not take Varna and Jati synonymously.

Differences between Caste and Class

While a caste is hereditary, a class is non-hereditary in nature. A class system allows both exogamy and endogamy, permits mobility either up or down the system, and allows an individual to remain in the status to which he was born. Thus a class is primarily based on socio-economic criteria. There are three major classes found: Upper, Middle, and Lower. Each class is divided into two sub-divisions. They are upper-upper and lower-upper; upper-middle and lower-middle; and upper-lower and lower-lower. A class is more open than the caste in the sense that mobility is allowed in the class system. It is not allowed that openly in the caste system. Further, caste system is based on ritual criterion whereas; class is based on secular criterion. Rituals criterion means it is based on religious myths, secular means non-religious criterion like economic, political and social criterion. However, in changing circumstances caste is also adapting to secular criteria. Consciousness is found in the class but not necessarily in the caste. However, today castes are also changing into classes in urban areas particularly in terms of economic criterion.

Changes in the Caste System

Changes in the caste system have been found in the last two centuries in general and in past 50 years in particular. Several processes like sanskritisation, westernization, modernization, dominant caste, industrialization, urbanization and democratic decentralisation have made consequent changes in the caste system. They are as follows:

1. **Sanskritisation:** It is a process by which any low caste could adapt to the behavior pattern, style of life, and culture of high caste and claim membership in that high caste. But they have to leave their unclean occupation and other impure habits like meat eating and taking liquor, etc. The untouchables were not allowed to sanskritize their status. Thus only middle castes could sanskritize themselves. For sanskritization, a caste must have three conditions: (a) it should have a touchable status, (b) it should have better economic condition, (c) it should make a claim to membership into a high caste, by propagating some story or myth. It is a group process and not an individual process. It is a lengthy process and not an overnight process. It does not lead to any structural change, only leads to positional change. It means a particular low caste changes its position into a high caste in a particular area whereas the caste structure does not change. Through this process a few lower castes in different parts of country have changed their status into higher castes.
2. **Westernisation:** It indicates adapting to western style of living, language, dress pattern, and behavioural pattern. In India largely the British influence has been found. The features of westernization are: (a) rational outlook (scientific and goal oriented outlook), (b) interest in material progress, (c) reliance on modern communication process and mass media, (d) English medium education, (e) high social mobility, etc. The higher castes were first to westernization themselves. Later on, the lower castes also adapted to this process. It has largely influenced the rigidity of caste system and changed it into a flexible system, particularly in the urban areas.
3. **Modernisation:** It is a process which primarily relies on scientific outlook; rational attitudes, high social mobility, mass mobilization, empathy, belief in liberty, equality and fraternity; high level of motivation to do every thing with perfection; specialization and super-specialisation in work; active participation; and dealing with complex organizations. It also requires changes in institutional, structural, attitudinal, and organizational aspects at then social, cultural and personal level. This has affected greatly the caste system in the sense that it has become more flexible. In urban areas castes are gradually becoming classes. In India we find an emerging middle class with a rational outlook and goal orientation. Modernisation is a broader concept than westernization. Any culture can modernise itself without adapting to western values. In our case we can modernize ourselves not by abandoning the tradition totally but by integrating the rational aspects of the tradition and suitable aspects of modernity. Our caste

- system has adapted suitably to the modern practices, i.e. educating people, forming formal organizations and making people conscious about their existence.
4. **Dominant Caste:** In the 20th century, the phenomena of dominant caste have emerged. It means some caste becomes economically and politically dominant virtually rules over other castes in the region. A caste can become dominant by having the features like: (a) large land holding in the area (good economic position), (b) politically dominant (becoming a vote bank), (c) having a large population, (d) high ritual status, (e) English medium education, (f) having a tradition in agriculture (not tillers but landlords), and (g) having a tradition of violence (for dominance muscle power is essential). However today it is not limited to the high caste only but has been found among the lower castes also.
 5. **Industrialisation and urbanization:** Both these processes have affected the caste system. With the growth of industrial towns and cities, migration to these areas has gone up. In these areas following strict caste rules are not possible. There are public places like parks, restaurants, canteens, hotels, offices and communication systems like buses and trains etc. where inter-dinning and sharing places are essential. Hence, a flexible approach has been adapted.
 6. **Democratic decentralization:** Through the introduction of Panchayati Raj, local self-governments have been created in the villages. In the Panchayat reservation has been made for the lower castes. This has given an opportunity for the lower castes to empower themselves.
 7. **Caste and politics:** It is not a new phenomenon since politics is a part of life always. During the Varna vyavastha, Brahmanical supremacy was an example of politics. Today it is said that castes have a close link with politics because castes have become vote banks, castes have become politically aware, there have been identification of castes with political parties and every caste has its own association. In fact, the link between caste and politics has led to an empowerment among the lower castes. These castes never had any opportunities to express themselves. Today they ventilate their feelings through elections and power lobby. Dalit politics is one such example, where the Dalits are trying to assert their identities and have become successful in capturing power in various States. However, the negative aspects of this link have been found in functionalism, i.e. the high castes always want to maintain their status quo. They are not able to accept the changing dominant position of the lower castes. This has led to frequent conflicts between high castes and low castes in several regions of the country. However, this is only a transitional phase. Better education, mass awareness campaign and good employment opportunities would ensure smooth passage towards a progressive society.
 8. **Caste and economy:** Traditionally, it was said that caste system has been functional for the society particularly in the economic sense. It is nothing but the jajmani system. It is a system of traditional occupation for the lower castes,

particularly the service caste. The service caste is known as Kamins and they used to provide service to the higher castes known as Jajmans. The Kamins provided specialized skills and services to the Jajmans and in return they used to get rewards in kind (food grains). The relationship between Jajmans and Kamins used to be a permanent and hereditary relationship i.e. after the death of the Jajman, his son used to be a Jajman and the same principal applied to the Kamins. Thus, it was a functional relationship in village India. However, due to introduction of market economy and land reforms the Jajmani system gradually is being eroded.

In this manner, caste system has undergone many changes due to the above processes and it has adapted to the new socio-economic condition. In urban areas, today people do not adhere to caste norms. The only aspect where caste comes is that during marriage they still become endogamous. However, as mentioned earlier, some people have adopted to inter-caste marriage and inter-religious marriages.

References

Ghurye, G. S. 1932. *Caste and Race in India*. London: Kegan Paul.

Srinivas, M. N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Srinivas, M. N. 1956. "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization." *Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15: 481-496.

Srinivas, M. N. 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley.

Srinivas, M. N. 1968. "Mobility in the Caste System," in M. Singer and B. S. Cohn, eds., *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Chicago: Aldine .

Srinivas, M. N. 1989. *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*. Delhi: Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Questions

1. What do you understand by caste?
2. What are the main features of the caste system?
3. What is the main difference between varna and jati?
4. What is the main difference between caste and class?
5. Identify the various processes that is bringing about changes in the traditional caste system.