UNIT 1 TRIBES AND CASTES: CHARACTERISTICS AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Structure
1.0 Objectives
1.1 Introduction
1.2 Tribes and castes: characteristics and conceptual issues
1.3 Caste
1.4 Origin of varnas
1.5 Origin of Jatis
1.6 The attributes that characterize the caste system
1.7 Let us sum up
1.8 Check your progress: possible answers
1.9 Suggested reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:
- know the characteristics of a tribe; and
- analyse the concepts that help us to understand tribes and castes.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Talking about the economic status of the tribes, in a tribal society, there is equality to access to its resources. Yet, the actual income of each family depends on many factors such as skill, number of able persons in a family and so on. So we find resources of the tribe to be unequally distributed. However, there exists a system which prevents accumulation. This brings mechanisms of redistribution into play that tends to enforce an egalitarian consumption. In the sphere of the caste system, we notice inequality of social status within the same caste. At another level we notice that even between castes there exists inequality regarding access to knowledge, productive resources and social status. The same inequality prevails in the field of culture and traditional notions of justice - for instance, caste-wise punishments are fixed for breaking laws.

It seems that there is a stark contrast between the tribal and the caste system. In the tribe system, there is the notion of equality while the caste system represents the notion of inequality.

The tribal and the caste system both have many features. Here we will try to look at the hierarchy of these features.
1.2 TRIBES AND CASTE: CHARACTERISTICS AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

In eighteenth century writings on India, the term ‘caste’ has often been used synonymously with ‘tribe’ and later as in the phrase, caste and tribe, as if they were cognate social groups. With the rise and growth of nationalism in Europe, the term ‘tribe’ was used to denote a particular stage of socio-political evolution of a community of people in a given region and language area. In their progressive march through time, people who were aspiring towards nationhood, clan, tribe, nation etc. became denotative of various stages. Let us have a look at the origin of the term and concept of ‘tribe’. The Middle English term *tribuz* which means the three divisions, into which the early Romans were grouped, is derived from a Latin root. This evolved into the modern English tribe. For the Romans, the tribe was a political division. The Greeks equated it with their ‘fraternities’ at times, with geographical division at others. However, in Irish traditions, the term tribe meant families or communities of people having the same surname. In some other places of the West, it stood for a division of territory allotted to a family or community.

For modern day anthropologists and sociologists of western origin, the term tribe means ‘a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous conditions, under a headman or chief.’ Roughly speaking, most of the western scholars working on India have been using this term with the above meaning, with minor changes of emphasis here and there.

While considering the social situation in India, it would be a fruitful exercise to see whether this definition fits in. Do we find something in our society that is analogous to what is called tribe, and do the communities of people in India recognize it as such? In Indian languages - including Sanskrit and Prakrit - *Jana* seems to have been the term to denote a tribe. These *Janas*, whom we call tribes were different from the other communities of people in the sense that they continued to remain outside the control of the *Jati* system of social organization.

In spite of various efforts by anthropologists in the study of primitive societies, there is hardly any satisfactory way of defining a tribal society. This amounts to, in the Indian context, a somewhat nebulous sociological type by contrasting it with another almost equally nebulous type. An anthropologist does not pay sufficient attention to the definition of tribal society, but tacitly assumes that what was being studied in Australia, Melanesia and Africa were various forms of tribal society. They vaguely assume that tribes are a more or less homogeneous society having a common culture. From the time of Evans Pritchard, anthropologists started trying in a much more systematic way to provide a structural definition of the tribe, particularly in the context of segmentary societies.

I.M. Lewis notes “Ideally, tribal societies are small in scale, restricted in the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal and political relations, and possess a morality, religion and world view of corresponding dimensions”.

Marshall D. Sahlins provides another characteristic of tribal society by arguing that the term ‘tribal society’ should be restricted to what are called segmentary systems. Segmentary systems are small in scale but they represent a definite
structural type which is quite different from the more complex social systems in which the peasantry and gentry co-exist. Here one can argue that the definition of a tribal society as a segmentary system may not be of much practical use in a country like India where it is not easy to identify segmentary societies easily. Bailey is considered to be the only anthropologist working in the Indian field who has tried to characterize tribes in terms of segmentary principles. He worked on the contrast between tribe and caste.

Most of the Indian anthropologists have not given much serious thought to the problem of creating a definition of tribal society which suits the Indian context. They have swung continually between textbook definitions of tribe and prevailing classifications of Indian society into tribal and non-tribal. It is not very clear what is meant by tribal society or how the term ought to be used in India.

During the nineteenth century, it was mainly the British administrators who started the convention of categorizing certain groups in Indian society as tribes. With a view to give them administrative and political concessions, from 1930’s onward, lists began to be prepared of Indian tribes. The lists of scheduled tribes attached to the constitution of India had its origin in these. Since independence, anthropologists have more or less accepted this list without critically examining its rationale.

The British decennial census operations included not only the counting of heads but the classification of the population into various categories. This process resulted in the creation of an enormously complex system of categories for dividing the population into tribes, castes, sects and occupations. Many of those in charge of census operations had a passion for ethnology and this contributed to the complexity of the categorical apparatus they created.

Initially the term ‘tribe’ was used in a rather loose sense, employed frequently to describe groups such as Jats and Ahirs. During the time that J.H.Hutton was in charge of the 1931 census, the distinction between ‘tribe’ and caste became an important issue to some extent. Tribes were viewed more and more in religious and not just ecological terms. Any group which could be shown to be clearly ‘Hindu’ in its religious beliefs and practices, was considered a caste; if it was animist it had to be treated as tribe.

B.C. Devalle writes, “Tribe is essentially a ‘construct’ and the tribal construct in India is a colonial category”. There were no tribes in Jharkhand until the European perception of Indian reality constructed them and colonial authorities gave them their administrative sanction. She feels that tribe is a misnomer in the context of the Jharkhand Adivasi world. By ‘tribe’ she means a set of more or less fixed attributes. She presents the idea of tribe in these words, “It is erroneous to place Jharkhand’s adivasi societies within the artificially created framework of ‘tribe’. The assumed egalitarianism, the primitive subsistence economy with little or no external trade, the autonomy and isolation of such an ideal unit, are not to be found among Jharkhand’s adivasis, either now or in the past”. Devalle argues, “The myth of the tribe was designed to promote specific imperial interest … The tribal construct in India … formed part of the colonial legitimizing ideology. As such this category operated as a device to catalogue conquered populations, to formulate imperial policies and to facilitate the incorporation of these populations into the colonial system”. She further feels, “The adivasi societies were perceived
as an undifferentiated mass from which to extract labour and revenue, a process that was thought to lead automatically to their "civilization": to the creation of the colonized man in body and soul."

Most anthropologists working both in tribal and non-tribal societies are often caught in the quagmire of classification of societies into egalitarian and non-egalitarian. Christopher Boehm writes, “Egalitarian society” has become one of anthropology’s best known socio-political types.” Anthropologists are fascinated by a non-stratified structure of society. Many of them, however, comment that the concept of an egalitarian society is utterly meaningless. One finds the western conception of these categories questionable. Their methodological and analytical utility can also be subjected to scrutiny. A variety of arguments is put forth in relation to less advanced societies as egalitarian in character vis-à-vis complex, stratified, modern political systems. Some feel that egalitarianism is chronologically prior to stratification. It shows a balanced evolution in human society beginning in opposition to its animal base.

India has probably the largest tribal population in the world - over thirty million in 1971. Its most striking feature is its enormous diversity. One feature of this distribution is the fact that at least outwardly, the tribal people of one particular region often resemble more closely the non-tribal people of that region than the tribal people of another region.

Tribes are autonomous social entities. No tribe can claim to be socially superior to the other. Territorially and linguistically, tribes are more homogeneous than castes. Barring a few examples, individual tribes do not have distinctive occupations. In some instances, tribes are also endogamous groups like castes. Their society is considered egalitarian in the sense that except for the village headman of the clan or tribal chief, all other members of a tribe enjoy equal social status. In such societies, free mixing of unmarried young men and women is permitted and they are allowed to choose their spouses. In a tribal society there is no dowry system. They permit divorce and remarriage both for divorced women and widows. The practice of bride price is prevalent, where the groom’s parents are to compensate the bride’s family with money and presents for the loss of an earning member of that family.

The religion of the tribes is animistic which consists of the worship of local deities both benevolent and malevolent, and of the spirits of ancestors. The priest of a tribe is drawn from its own community. He functions as a link between the people and their deities or supernatural powers. He is also regarded as a soothsayer and medicine man.

Economically, some of the tribal societies still live by hunting and gathering. Others live by stock-breeding, fishing, slash and burn agriculture or primitive plough agriculture. Every tribe includes a certain proportion of hunting and gathering in their subsistence system.

In India we find about 427 tribal communities. There is no single way to classify them in a satisfactory way. According to N.K.Bose, “There are many ways in which tribes can be classified. One as we have already said, is by language; another is by religion; third is by the degree of isolation to which they are subject, which has led some to retain a larger proportion of their original culture than
others. But we believe, the plainest way will be to arrange them into categories based on the manner in which they primarily make their living”. Bose has divided the tribes into three main categories,

1) Hunters, fishers, and gatherers
2) Shifting cultivators
3) Settled agriculturists using the plough and plough cattle.

He further lists two other categories such as nomadic cattle keepers, artisans and labourers and workers in plantation and industries.

Each tribe has its own economic differentiation and specific cultural identity and constitutes one of the major segments in the multi ethnic social fabric of India. Most of them live in the interior hinterland. Their economy is in a constant state of flux with compelling heterogeneity. Their social and cultural institutions are far from simple.

### 1.3 CASTE

The word ‘caste’ is of Portuguese and Spanish origin, derived from *casta*, meaning ‘not mixed’ or the Latin root *castus*, implying chaste. The Spanish *casta* or Portuguese *cast* came to mean just the breed or lineage that seems to have been socially considered as pure, unpolluted. Interestingly in South America, the Spaniards use the term *casta* for mixed breeds of the Europeans, American Indians and Negros. The seventeenth and eighteenth century European writers in India saw here a kind of social organization which might have been similar to what they presumably knew as caste. It can be said that the social organization known to them as caste was based on a hierarchical ranking of people determined by birth or lineage. Till the late 18th century, the term caste was being used synonymously with ‘tribe’ and as late as 1813, it meant to English writers on India nothing more than a kind of ranking based on birth.

In English literature, a lot of writing is about the tribes and castes of every region of British India. In many Indian languages, the word *Jati* (or its equivalent) is used indiscriminately for what the English labeled as ‘tribe’ and ‘caste’.

The Indian caste system presents a complex social phenomenon. The system is so peculiar that no satisfactory definition is possible. So there is no unanimity among scholars on the subject. E. Senart states that a caste system is a close corporation, exclusive and in theory at any rate, rigorously hereditary. Caste is equipped with certain traditional and independent organizations, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies endowed with more or less full authority. Its members are often united in the celebration of certain festivals and they are further bound together by common occupation and by the practice of common custom which relates more particularly to marriage, food and questions of ceremonial pollution. A caste rules its members by the exercise of a jurisdiction, the extent of which is fair wide. It succeeds in enforcing its authority by the sanction of certain penalties, especially of exclusion, either absolute or revocable, from the group.

Sir H. Risley feels that “A caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families, bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a
The ‘Folk’ and Modern Narratives

mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give opinion as forming a single 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.”

According to sir E.A. Gait, “The main characteristics of a caste are the belief in a common origin held by all the members and the possession of the traditional occupation. It may be defined as an endogamous group or collection of such groups, bearing a common name, having the same traditional occupation, claiming descent from the same source, and commonly regarded as forming a single homogeneous community”.

In his book “History of Caste” Ketkar defines a caste as ‘a social group having two characteristics’:

1) Membership is confined to those who are born of members and include all persons so born.

2) The members are forbidden by an inexorable law to marry outside the group. Each one of such groups has a special name by which it is called.

Several 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.

Louis Dumont in his work on the caste system observes that caste is an institution unique to the Hindus. He is critical of scholars who regard it as yet another form of social stratification. He feels that to do so would be to project western socio-centrism on to a social institution that is totally alien to western culture. According to Dumont, some eight centuries before Christ, Brahmin thinkers made an absolute distinction between status which meant religious rank and power, and further subordinated power to status. This system of subordination of status to power underlies the Vedic institution of Varna, whereby society is divided into four orders, Brahmin (Priest), Kshatriya (Warrior), Vaishya (trader and agriculturist) and Shudra (Menial). Thus the institution of Varna presents the purest example of hierarchy, Varna, according to him, is different from Jati in that it refers to open functional categories and not to closed, endogamous and hereditary groups in Jati.

Dumont observes that Varna does not represent a linear, hierarchical order but a segmentary one and that the same is true of Jati. For him the basic of the Jati system is the opposition between the pure and the impure. It relates to higher and lower castes. The higher are pure and the two have to be kept apart in order to safeguard the purity of the higher caste. The purity-impurity distinction is only the form which the hierarchy takes. A homology exists between Varna and Jati. The function that is performed by the king in the Varna system is performed by the dominant caste in the Jati system.

The idea of purity and impurity plays a vital part not only in influencing the rank of a caste and the pattern of its relation to other castes, but in the lifecycle - the many crises and daily life.
Now we can take a look at the most apparent features of the present day caste system. The members of the different castes cannot have matrimonial connections except with persons of their own caste; there are restrictions regarding a member of one caste eating and drinking with those of a different caste; broadly speaking, there are fixed occupations for different castes; according to the existing hierarchical gradation, Brahmans are at the top in the most recognized position; birth alone decides a man’s connections with his caste for life; transition from one caste to another, high or low is not permitted.

In the matter of using the word caste to denote both Varna and Jati it can be suggested that they are not the same thing. Varna represents the fourfold division of society and the Jati represent the smaller groups existing in society.

### 1.4 ORIGIN OF VARNAS

It is said that the Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras were created separately from the mouth, the arms, the brain and the feet respectively, of the creator. This idea appears in the Purusha Sukta of the tenth book of the Rig-Veda. In spite of this widely popular Purusha theory of the origin of Varnas, the Dharmasastras give different and often contradictory and fanciful accounts of the origin of Varnas. A great variety of speculation exists on this subject.

### 1.5 ORIGIN OF JATIS

Manu writes that the four original Varnas were created from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively of Brahma. By a series of crossbreeding, first between members of the four Varnas and then between the descendants of these initial unions, many castes or Jatis were produced. This theory seems to be highly fanciful because:

1) It assumes that in one way or another, the entire population of the world is descended from the four original Varnas.

2) Despite the fact that we have examples of castes which have developed owing to various factors, they all are supposed to have been produced by interbreeding.

Risley observes several processes by which castes are formed. They are:

1) When, either under their own tribal designation or under a new caste name, a whole tribe or a large section of it enrolls itself in the ranks of Hinduism.

2) The adoption of new occupations or changes in the original occupation may give rise to subdivision of the caste which ultimately develops as a new caste.

3) New castes are also formed as a consequence of the neglect of established usages or the adoption of new ceremonial practices or secular occupations.

According to Risley, “It is possible that the Brahminical theory of castes may be nothing more than a modified version of the division of society into four classes - priests, warriors, cultivators and artisans - which appears in the sacerdotal literature of ancient Persia.”
According to Sanart, caste is the normal development of ancient Aryan institutions, which assumed a peculiar form because of the specific conditions in India. He attaches great importance to the principle of exogamy or prohibition of marriage within one’s Gotra as a fundamental basis of the Indian caste system. Many castes were formed by the splitting up of the four Varnas along with those which were formed from tribal or national groups.

The development of intercaste marriage restrictions was mainly due to the racial difference between the white conquerors (The Aryans) and the black natives (Non-Aryans) and the desire of the former to preserve the purity of their bloodlines.

J.C. Nesfield and some others feel that common occupations or division of labour was the main cause of the origin of the caste system. Nesfield opines that caste originated in India long after the Aryans had been absorbed into the mass of the native people and all racial distinctions had disappeared between the Aryans and aboriginals. Men from various tribes grouped into different occupations. They then borrowed the principles of endogamy and prohibition of community from the customs of their precious tribes and thereby solidified themselves into isolated units. As for their ranking, the castes which followed most primitive occupations like hunting, fishing, basket making etc. came to be regarded as the lowest, while the metal workers, agriculturists, and traders were higher in rank. The highest caste consisted of those who were priests and teachers.

There are many shortcomings to this theory. It is not likely that the caste system emerged so late – only after the Aryans and non-Aryans had united into one people. Had this notion been correct, all persons of one occupation ought to belong to the same caste, at least in one locality.

Abbe Dubois tries to establish that a division into castes was common to the greater part of the ancient civilizations. In the same way, Max Muller attempts to establish the universality of ethnic differences, political opposition and professional specialization upon which, he feels the whole system rests.

Ampere finds three conditions essential to the existence of a caste. Those are:

1) To resist alien occupations.
2) To prevent any alliance with outsiders.
3) To continue in the same profession handed down by ancestors.

Burnof finds three elements constituting caste: the division of functions, the hereditary transmission of these functions and hierarchy.

On the basis of the above discussion we can identify certain characteristics of the caste system. They are:

1) The minimally endogamous group should be treated as caste. The term sub-caste should be used only for specific connotations.

2) Caste cannot be treated in isolation.

The range of traits attributed to caste and the caste system are:
1) Endogamy:

The kinship may be direct or through other kin, but all members of a caste can be brought together on one genealogical table. Rules of endogamy form the essential basis of a caste. This aspect makes the status orientation of its members inscriptive and helps to maintain the social distance between similar units of the system.

2) Membership by birth

Castes can be said to be birth status groups. Membership is confined to those who are born of members.

3) Common occupation

There is an association between caste and occupation, but it is not the basic attribute of caste. Occupational change does not ordinarily bring about change in designation or composition of a caste. In the case of various endogamous groups getting associated with the same occupation in a specific region and possessing the same name, they may be designated as a caste cluster rather than a single caste.

4) Caste council

An effective caste group controls its members and imposes restrictions in regard to choice of mates and social intercourse with other castes. In case of violation of caste rules the culprit is dealt with and punished according to the codes of that particular caste. In many areas, for effective control over caste members, caste councils are formed. The areas covered by these councils differ from caste to caste. These are not strictly defined areas as marriages outside these circles can, and do, take place. The limits of these circles also keep on changing.

5) Name

Every caste has a name which in some cases also suggests the occupational association of a caste. If in any case a caste merges its identity into a bigger and different group, it is only the name which is given up and the frontier of endogamy is extended so as to include the limits of endogamy of the other caste.

6) Diacritical signs

Castes also have certain diacritical signs which provide clues to caste identification. There are certain signs and names which are specific to a particular caste, others to a group of castes belonging to certain strata; still others may be open to all. Some more indicators may be listed as dressing patterns, sacred thread and the tilak on the forehead. The manner of wearing clothes, the different materials and ornamentation used and the degree of ostentation are other significant diacritical signs.

1.6 THE ATTRIBUTES THAT CHARACTERIZE THE CASTE SYSTEM

1) Plurality of interacting endogamous groups:

The caste system can be seen as a network of relationships between separate and distinct castes. The caste system is composed of a plurality of interacting
endogamous groups.

2) Hierarchy

The caste system can be viewed as a social organizational structure functioning through hierarchical birth status groups. In the context of the Indian caste system, this hierarchy is based on the concept of ritual purity and pollution. Caste divisions are considered to be divinely ordained and hierarchically graded. Ghurya has listed a number of “civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections.

3) Traditional division of labour

Leach has emphasized the rigidity of the occupational stratification of the caste system. Yet the traditional division of labour may be considered as a peripheral attribute of the caste system. One can see that changes in the occupational structure have important consequences for the caste system.

The characteristics of caste and the caste system discussed above are at a higher level of generality and not culture bound. In particular, regions and in specific cases, additional characteristics may feature as well.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In the tribe system, there is the notion of equality while the caste system represents the notion of inequality.

Tribes are autonomous social entities. Territorially and linguistically, tribes are more homogeneous than castes. In some instances, tribes are also endogamous groups like castes. The Indian caste system presents a complex social phenomenon. Louis Dumont in his work on the caste system observes that caste is an institution unique to the Hindus. Rules of endogamy form the essential basis of a caste. Castes can be said to be birth status groups. There is an association between caste and occupation, but it is not the basic attribute of caste.

An effective caste group controls its members and imposes restrictions in regard to choice of mates and social intercourse with other castes. In many areas, for effective control over caste members, caste councils are formed. The areas covered by these councils differ from caste to caste. Every caste has a name which in some cases also suggests the occupational association of a caste. Castes also have certain diacritical signs which provide clues to caste identification. The caste system can be seen as a network of relationships between separate and distinct castes, a social organizational structure functioning through hierarchical birth status groups and composed of a plurality of interacting endogamous groups.

1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) What do you understand by the term ‘tribe’? Discuss in the light of views given by various scholars.
2) What is caste? Elaborate on the characteristics of the caste system.

3) What are the differences between the tribal system and the caste system?

**Answers**

1) Check 1.2

2) Check 1.3

3) Check 1.3

### 1.9 SUGGESTED READING

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