
UNIT 20 CASTE DYNAMICS: ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL

Structure

- 20.0 Objectives
- 20.1 Introduction
- 20.2 Ideal Typical Features of the Caste System
- 20.3 Concepts of Sanskritization Difference and Mobility
- 20.4 Changes and Mobility in the Caste System: Economic and Political Factors
- 20.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 20.6 Key Words
- 20.7 Further Readings
- 20.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

20.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the meaning of the caste system and its various ideal typical features;
- Analyse the problems of the above conceptualisation through the concepts of Sanskritization and Difference;
- Explain political and economic sources of mobility and change in the caste system; and
- Describe various changes that have taken place in the caste system during both pre-modern period and modern period.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with mainly various changes brought about by economic and political forces in the caste system. This task has been accomplished by explaining the meaning of various concepts as well as by referring to important sociological and anthropological studies. For better understanding of this problem we have divided this unit into three main sections.

The first section provides an ideal typical understanding of the caste system.

The second section provides meaning of the concepts of Sanskritization and Difference which make a critique of the this understanding by pointing out the dynamic nature of the caste system.

The third section provides an analysis of the changes and mobility in the caste system brought about by economic and political forces during both pre-modern period and modern period.

20.2 IDEAL TYPICAL FEATURES OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

In order to present a picture of caste dynamics it is imperative that we, first of all, understand ideal typical nature of the caste system. Such an exercise will help us to realize

various changes that have taken place in the caste system. It has been felt and realized in Indian sociology or social anthropology that the best way to understand the nature of the system various castes create by their interrelationships can be achieved by delineating the various features it exhibits. Features of the caste system discussed by G. S. Ghurye has been accepted by all but with some objections. Picture of the caste system that comes out from Ghurye characterisation can be considered ideal typical which is following.

i) Segmental Division of Society

The caste system divides society into various caste groups with a well developed life of their own. Membership of the group is determined by birth. The status of a person is determined by the traditional importance of the caste in which he has the fortune of being born. Caste is hereditary.

ii) Hierarchy

Hierarchy has been considered another important feature of the caste system. Position of a caste in hierarchy is determined by various factors such as (a) the items of its dietary, (b) acceptance and refusal of water and food from other castes, (c) the ritual it performs, (d) the customs it observes, (e) its traditional privileges and disabilities and (f) the myth of its origin. The castes who are placed upper in the hierarchy are considered to be purer than those who are placed lower.

For Dumont, the single true principle on which caste hierarchy is based is the opposition of the pure and the impure. To quote him, "This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure over the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical co-existence of the two opposites". Dumont considers hierarchy as the defining feature of the caste system because it is "the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole". It is a relation "between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed. It is responsible for the "linear order of castes from A to Z".

iii) Restriction on Feeding and Social Intercourse

To preserve the purity there are restrictions on feeding and social intercourse and minute rules are laid down with regard to the kind of food and drink that can be acceptable.

Activity 1

Note down in your notebook whether it is in the town or village where the ideal typical features of caste can be found. Discuss this note with students at the study centre.

iv) Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges of the Different Sections

The caste system imposes spatial segregation on castes which is the most clear cut mark of civil privileges and disabilities. Generally, the untouchable or the impure castes are made to live on the outskirts of villages.

v) Lack of unrestricted Choice of Occupation

The caste system determines occupation of a person. In other words, members of a caste or a group of allied castes are expected to follow a certain occupation.

vi) Restrictions on Marriage

The caste system imposes severe restrictions on marriage outside one's own caste. In other words, a caste forbids its members to marry persons outside it. Thus, caste is endogamous. Principle of endogamy is such a dominant feature of caste system that it has been argued that endogamy is 'the essence of caste system'.

20.3 CONCEPTS OF SANSKRITIZATION, DIFFERENCE, AND MOBILITY

The above presentation of the caste system as a closed system based on all inclusive principle of hierarchy which does not permit mobility for its members have not been accepted by all. Some sociologists and social anthropologists have raised objections and made valuable criticism of such conceptualisation. Criticism made by M.N. Srinivas and Dipankar Gupta through their concepts of Sanskritisation and Difference are the most noteworthy.

i) Sanskritization

The concept of sanskritization was developed by M.N. Srinivas to describe the dynamic nature of the caste system. Srinivas, defines the concept of Sanskritization 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”. It is a much broader definition of Sanskritization. It is neither confined to Brahmins as only reference group not to the imitation of mere rituals and religious practices. It also means imitation of ideologies.

This observation points out variations in and varieties of mobility or change in the caste system. To make his observation more powerful and empirically substantiated he cites the historical study of K.M. Pannikar. Pannikar holds the view that all Kshatriyas have come into being by usurpation of power by the lower castes and consequently the Kshatriya role and social position .

Srinivas further adds that though all non-dominant, particularly low or non-twice born castes want to sanskritize themselves but only those succeed whose economic and political conditions have improved.

ii) Difference

The concept of difference has been developed by Dipankar Gupta to present a picture of the caste system which is totally different from the one that we find in many books including Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*. Gupta claims that empirically as well as logically it is wrong to say that a single all inclusive hierarchy based on the principle of the opposition of purity and pollution can be a defining feature of the caste system. To quote him, “Any notion of hierarchy is arbitrary and valid from the perspective of certain individual castes. To state that pure hierarchy is one that is universally believed in, or one which legitimizes the position of those, who participate in the caste system is misleading. The separation between castes is not only on matters which connote the opposition between purity and pollution. Distinctions and diacritical notches which are not even remotely suggestive of purity and pollution are observed as strictly. Obversely, distinctions relating to purity and pollution do not systematically affect caste status. The cultivating Amot caste solemnize their Goraiya festival with the sacrifice of a pig and yet Brahmans take water from them” Gupta points out.

Box 20.01

Gupta argues that different origin tales or Jati puranas of different castes justify different hierarchies and the Brahmin is not always at the top. The existence of various models of Sanskritization for upward mobility which have been discussed in the previous section, also indicates strongly the presence of multiple caste hierarchies. Each of these origin tales or caste legends “Captures independently the essence of ‘difference’ between castes and are therefore logically of equal status”. The constitutive elements of ‘difference’ “are not arranged vertically or hierarchically, but horizontally or even separately”. Therefore, in the system of ‘difference’ one encounters discrete categories in place of a continuous scale. None of the castes considers that it is made up of unique substance, or that the substance in it are less pure. Each caste maintains its own traditions, customs and ideologies and, therefore, differentiates from others.

Therefore, Gupta opines that ‘difference’ and ‘ritualization of multiple social practices’ constitute the essence of the caste system. To quote him, “we will define the caste system as a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by the ritualization of

Brahmins for performing an important ceremony. This apart, a king used to raise or lower the ranks of casters as a reward or punishment.

The second source of mobility in the caste system during pre-modern period was the availability of marginal land which could be brought under the plough. This sort of land was always available everywhere. According to Burton Stein, this factor made possible the establishment of new settlements and even new regional societies which facilitated many individual families to change their caste status. This apart, various sub divisions which are found among several peasant castes such as Tamil Vellalas was caused by this spatial mobility.

ii) Modern Period

Modern period started with the British rule. In this period above mentioned sources of mobility in the caste system disappeared and new sources of mobility came into existence. The British rule introduced the process of modernisation and westernisation through certain new economic and political policies which affected social formation deeply and brought about structural change, to some extent, in it. Consequently the caste system underwent certain significant changes which added new structures and functions to it. Some most notable and significant economic and political policies listed by Srinivas are (1) the introduction of a single political role straddling the entire sub-continent; (2) the introduction of formal bureaucratic and military organisations; (3) the land survey and settlement work; (4) the introduction of tenurial reforms; (5) the introduction of private ownership to land which made it saleable; (6) making new economic opportunities in towns and cities available; (7) the introduction of the concept of equality of all citizens before the law; (8) providing right to everyone not to be imprisoned without resort due legal process; (9) introducing the freedom to practice as well as to propagate one's religion and culture, and (10) making suttee, human sacrifice and human slavery illegal.

Box 20.02

Independent India initiated various new political and economic policies to make economic, political and socio-cultural structures democratic and modern. These policies were aimed at bringing all-round development in the society such as industrial and urban growth, agricultural development, land reforms, human resource development, community development and the abolition of untouchability, suttee, human and animal sacrifice, idolatory, ritualism, polytheism, polygyny, infant marriage and the ban on widow remarriage. They accelerated the process of modernisation initiated by the British rule and added new dimensions to it. Consequently, change and mobility in the caste system gained momentum.

iii) Dissociation between caste and occupation

The most notable change in the caste system is the dissociation between caste and occupation. It is greater in the towns than in the rural areas, and much greater in the big cities. Due to industrialisation and modernisation a number of new occupations have come into existence which can be considered "caste-free". One can easily notice people belonging to a caste getting involved into various traditionally forbidden occupations. Brahmins can be seen working in shoe factory. Similarly, Harijans can be seen performing administrative and academic jobs. Dissociation between caste and occupation has developed to such an extent that the phenomenon of caste can no longer be defined on the basis of its relation to a certain occupation.

iv) Disintegration of the Jajmani System

Related with this change in the caste system is the disintegration of the jajmani system. This phenomenon signifies a major change in the caste system because as Kolenda notes that "purity pollution and hierarchy are all involved in the Jajmani system". Ideally the jajmani system constitutes three categories of people belonging to different castes. These categories are known as jajman, Kamin and Purohit. Kamins and Purohits provide services to jajmans. But they provide different services. Purohits perform rituals and worship deities for jajmans. Kamins perform manual work for jajmans like washing clothes, shaving, cutting and dressing hair, etc. In turn, jajmans pay Purohits in both cash

Explaining Caste in Indian Society and kind and Kamins in kind on a yearly basis which is fixed. Jajmans belong to all castes. Kamins belong to some specific castes. And Purohits are Brahmins.

It has been observed that jajmani system is disintegrating because of various reasons. Firstly, the families belonging to Kamin and Purohit castes who consider their traditional caste occupation less prestigious or non-prestigious and economically less beneficial have abandoned them at the earliest opportunity. They are neither all Brahmin families are Purohits nor all Kamin families are Kamins. There are also a lot of jajmani families who have decided not to avail the services of Kamins. This apart, there is a large variation so far as availing the services of Kamins is concerned. Secondly, as it has already been pointed out there is no caste-based division of labour. Families belonging to the low Kamin castes have taken up occupations which are traditionally supposed to be done by higher-twice born castes, and the other way round, too. There are also instances of non-Brahmin families acting as Purohit families. This phenomenon is more visible in those areas which have felt the impact of anti-Brahminical movements.

Because of such changes the jajmani system no longer denotes a certain kind of relationship between castes but between families. Some of these families are labour buyers and some are wage earners. Their relationship is purely economic. Therefore, caste has ceased to be the primary component of the jajmani system even if it is said that the jajmani system still exists in one form or another.

v) **Weakening of the Rules of Purity and Pollution**

Increasing dissociation between caste and occupation and the concomitant process of disintegration of the jajmani system have accompanied with the weakening of the rules of purity and pollution. It has been observed that people belonging to various castes hardly observe the rules of purity and pollution while selecting their occupations and interacting with fellow-beings and colleagues. In this respect, they assign profitability of an occupation their top most priority. For a caste it is no longer possible to deny basic conditions of decent living (size, shape and placement of a house, dress materials, style of living, etc.) to a person on the ground of birth in a particular caste. Disappearance of untouchability as a caste practice from the public sphere also denotes the weakening of the rules of purity and pollution.

vi) **Breakdown in the Traditional Intercaste Power Relationship**

The phenomenon of dominance of one caste over another is one of the most important factors in the maintenance of the caste system. Traditionally, economic and political dominance coincided with ritual dominance. Victims of dominant caste families used to be sheltered by other dominant caste families. This structural arrangement of the caste system has changed to such an extent that it ceases to be a defining feature. The process started with the establishment of British rule. Yogendra Singh writes, "Instances of lower-subject-caste revolts against the upper-dominant-castes even during the Pre-Independence days have been many. In the villages Chanukhera in eastern U.P., the low castes (Chamars and Kahars) agitated against the Kshatriyas for better wages and freedom to participate in Congress movement for Independence, and to this with initial resistance the Kshatriyas finally had to acquiesce" (Singh 1977: 165). Bernard S. Cohn reports a similar case of challenge by a lower-subject-caste (Camars) to the dominance of Kshatriyas in Madhopur village.

F.G. Bailey in his study of Bisipara, a village in Khondamals in Orissa, provides a good example of a structural change in the power relationship of various castes which came in the wake of British rule. He observes that by trading in hides and liquor the 'untouchable' Boad distillers bought land equal to the upper-dominant warrior castes. Similarly, Ganjam distillers by trading in only liquor earned so much money to buy more land than any other caste in the village. These economic changes brought about changes in the political structure of the village altering the balance of inter-caste power relationship.

Activity 2

Discuss with various people the caste dynamics-economic and political. Note down the main points in your notebook.

After Independence change in the configuration of power of castes gained momentum. William L. Rowe, in his study of Senapur, observed, "in the past a small group of economically and politically all powerful Kshatriya landlords quietly (for the most part) directed the society. Now with the social tie of landlord and tenant severed, a numerous and economically able caste community such as the Noniya (a lower caste) feels somewhat free to pursue its own ends independently. About the village Kishan Garhi McKim Marriott also points out a similar process of change.

With breakdown of intercaste power relationship the earlier aspiration of lower-subject castes for Sanskritization has been replaced by a new honoured feeling of self identity within one's own caste or increased horizontal caste solidarity. The position of upper castes as reference group was challenged by differentiating ritual from the politico-economic aspects of caste system. In extreme cases as in D. M. K. or Arya Samaj movements the process of differentiation is absolutized by a conscious and total rejection of the caste ideology. Formation of a caste association with several new functions is a clear reflection of this phenomenon.

vii) Emergence of Caste Association

The nature of a caste association is different, in more than one sense, from caste as such. Organizations like Kayastha Samaj, Kshatriya Sabha, Teli association, Vaishya Mahasabha, Jat Sabha, Kurmi Mahasabha, Koeri Mahasabha, Bhumihar-Brahmin Mahasabha are some of the examples of caste association. Emergence of various castes such as Mahars and Maratha in Maharashtra, Kammas and Reddis in Andhra Pradesh and Lingayat and Okkaliga in Karnataka as political groups can also be cited as examples of caste association.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who developed the concept of Sanskritization?
.....
- 2) Does the concept of Sanskritization bring out dynamic nature of the caste system?
 Yes No
- 3) Who says that the caste system can be defined as a form of differentiation?
.....
- 4) Can the elements of the system of 'difference' be arranged vertically?
 Yes No

The main purpose of a caste association has always been to safeguard the interests of their members by building hostels, hospitals, colleges, schools, houses on a co-operative basis, banks, and by founding journals and endowing scholarships. In their proceedings caste associations claimed backwardness in politico-economic field and a high status in cultural or ritual sphere. Therefore, after Independence caste associations tended to become political pressure groups demanding for their members electoral tickets from the political parties, posts in the cabinet. Licences for undertaking various economic activities, concessions and privileges in education and appointment to government jobs, and a variety of other benefits.

Emergence of castes as pressure group and formation of caste associations clearly indicate the increased activity of caste in the political field. Now castes or caste association play important and pervasive roles in the political processes, especially in various elections and in the matters of distributions of posts in the institutions run by the government

The process of democratization bestows political power and activity upon the groups which have numerical strength provided that strength could be politically mobilized, which is possible if the existential situation of the group as such is homogenous and uniform. These conditions are fulfilled more in the case of lower or subaltern castes. Emergence of lower caste based political parties such as B.S.P., I.P.F., S.P., D.M.K., etc. are some good examples. This apart, launching of movements for more say in the political processes by numerically more powerful low castes in the form of anti-Brahmin movements mark out increasing politicisation of caste.

There is a strong tendency among people to vote for a candidate of one's own caste. Political parties do not ignore this fact. They try their best to put up candidates belonging to the numerically largest castes of the constituency if other conditions remain same. That is why matching a candidate by another candidate of the same caste has been a common policy of political parties in elections.

This apart, caste consideration influence political process in other ways as well. A large group of the Maharashtra Congress constituted by Brahmins formed Peasants and Workers party when they realized that Brahmin control over the Congress party. Kammas decided to control the communist party. That is why Kammas landlords were saved and protected by the Communists even in their violent struggle.

Politicization of castes is so much that in order to be politically powerful distinct caste groups come together and act collectively. Their coming together sometimes take the form of a political party or a faction or a pressure group. B.S.P., S.P., R.J.D., and D.M.K. are some of the examples. In Gujrat Kshatriya Sabha Rajputs admitted a lower caste Kolis to the rank of Kshatriya in order to have a larger say in the power structure of Gujrat state.

Thus, looking back at all that we have been through in this unit, we can conclude that the caste system has always interacted with and responded to economic and political forces of society. Changes in the economic and political structures and processes during the modern period have liquidated many traditional characteristics of the caste system and added new features and functions to it. The picture of caste or caste system that comes out from the above analysis is in consonance with Dipankar Gupta's conceptualisation of caste as discrete category and caste system as a system based on the principle of 'difference'.

20.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, in the first section, we have observed that in order to present a picture of caste dynamics, the ideal typical nature of the caste system should be presented in the first place. It exhibits six defining features: (1) segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy, (3) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, (4) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, (5) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restriction on marriage.

In the second section we have observed that this conceptualization of caste system has been criticised by many scholars. Criticism made by M.N. Srinivas and Dipankar Gupta are the most noteworthy. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization makes it quite clear that the caste system is not a static but dynamic system. Positional change or mobility has always taken place in the caste system. Through the concept of 'difference' Dipankar Gupta argues that the caste system is not based on the principle of hierarchy but on the principle of difference. Castes are discrete categories which cannot be placed on a continuous scale.

In third section we have observed that the caste system has always interacted with and responded to economic and political forces of society. During pre-modern period or before the British rule there were two important forces of change in the caste system: (1) fluidity of the political system, and (2) the availability of marginal land. During modern period the process of modernisation initiated by the introduction of various economic and political policies have brought about significant changes in the caste system. Such as : (1) dissociation between caste and occupation, (2) disintegration in the jajmani system,

(3) weakening of the principles of purity and pollution, (4) breakdown in the inter-caste power relationship, (5) emergence of caste association, and (6) increased activity of caste in political field or politicisation of caste.

20.6 KEY WORDS

- Difference** : It signifies a structure in which the elements of a whole are arranged horizontally and separately like discrete categories.
- Endogamy** : It denotes the rules of marriage which permit or prescribe marriage within one's own caste or a specific group.
- Hierarchy** : It signifies a structure in which the elements of a whole are ranked in vertically linear order on a continuous scale in relation to the whole.
- Ideal type** : It is a general and pure or abstract construct formed by emphasizing aspects of behaviour and institutions which are empirically observable and testable.
- Modernization** : It is a global process by which traditional societies achieved or achieve modernity (liberty, fraternity, and prosperity) in all spheres: economic, political, cultural and social.
- Sanskritization** : It denotes a change in the caste system which is brought about by the imitation of customs, manners, rituals, style of life, ideologies, etc. of the higher-dominant castes by the lower-subject castes.

20.7 FURTHER READINGS

Singh, Yogendra. 1977. *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*. Faridabad: Thomson Press.

Srinivas, M.N. 1981. *India: Social Structure*. Delhi, Hindustan Publishing Corporation.

20.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Louis Dumont
- 2) Yes
- 3) Yes
- 4) No.
- 5) i) Segmental division of society
ii) Hierarchy
iii) Restriction on feeding and social Intercourse
iv) Religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections
v) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation
vi) Restricts on choice of marriage partners.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) M.N. Srinivas
- 2) Yes
- 3) Dipankar Gupta
- 4) No

NOTES