
UNIT 19 CASTE IDENTITY: ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTIONAL APPROACHES

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19.0 OBJECTIVES

On having studied this unit you should be able to:

- Outline early explanations of caste;
- Describe the attributional approaches to caste;
- Highlight the main aspects of the interactional approaches to caste; and
- Become acquainted with some of the limitations of the attributional and interactional approaches to caste.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste identity is closely linked with the social fabric of a village, town or city. In the unit that follows we describe and analyze some of the major attempts to explain the ranking order that is ubiquitous so far as caste formations are concerned. To acquaint you with these approaches we will point out to you some of the early religious and sociological explanations of caste. This will set the backdrop for the attributional approaches to caste which analyze caste hierarchy in terms of the various immutable characteristics of caste. The incursion into these approaches is followed by the interactional approaches to caste hierarchy. Finally the unit picks up the threads of the approaches described and analysed

in the unit and points out the limitations of the types of the approaches that have been presented. This will round off our discussion on caste identity and how it maintains itself or mutates.

19.2 EARLY EXPLANATIONS OF CASTE

Various explanations of the origin of the caste have been forwarded, and early explanations often veer around the notion of 'attributes' or 'inalienable characteristics' of caste. Since we will be examining some of the explanations it would be better if we provide some idea of these characteristics. These are provided by religious theories and by secular sociological explanations. Let us now turn to the religious theories at first.

19.2.1 Religious Explanations

Religious explanations of caste origins in Hinduism refer to first of all the theory of 'divine origin' of caste. The idea in this theory is developed from verses in the Rig Veda right up to the Bhagavad Gita in contemporary times. It must be added that this is a Brahmanical version and not shared by many other communities.

Box 19.01

The legend goes that in the beginning of time the original Being 'produced' the various Varnas from different parts of his anthropomorphic body. Thus the Brahmins were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his chest; the Vaisyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. The dimension of the 'rank order' or hierarchical ordering was attached to the work that each of these categories were to perform. The topmost or highest social duties were assigned to the Brahmins and these were functions of the preserving knowledge and performing priestly duties. In the case of Kshatriyas the duties to be performed were that of the defending society from invasion, stable administration and protection of society in general. The Vaisyas were the bastions of trade and commerce and this was to be done in a fair and honest way. The Shudras which came lowest in the hierarchy thus laid down were a service varna which was to cater to the needs of all the varnas above them.

The varna scheme is a four fold scheme. It is further pointed out with reference to the theory of divine origin that over time each of the varnas developed into jatis or caste groups with specific attributes. The first three groups made up a category of the "twice born" and were initiated into the caste by the Sacred thread ceremony (yagyapavita). Each of the groups began specializing in particular type of profession and was restrained from performing the work of any other caste. Hierarchy was manifested both in attributional and interactional modes.

A second type of religious explanation is based on the guna theory, which is to be found in the religious literature including the Bhagavad Gita. This theory talks of the inherent qualities that characterize human beings. These three gunas are as below:

- i) 'sattva', or the quality of truth, Knowledge, goodness, virtue and alertness;
- ii) 'rajas' or the quality of activity, courage, bravery, force, power and passion;
- iii) 'tamas' or the quality of gloominess, dullness, stupidity and indolence.

It is easy to see how the above qualities were associated hierarchically with the Brahmins being considered 'Sattvic'; the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas being considered below the Brahmins, and being rajasic. Finally on the lowest rung of the ladder were the 'tamasic' Shudras.

19.2.2 Sociological Explanations

Unlike religious explanations the early sociological explanations of caste moved toward socially recognizable reality. Let us consider this briefly in the work of i) Karl Marx ii) Max Weber and iii) Celestin Bouglé.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society i) For Marx the relationships of social groups to land and its ownership determined the groups position in society. Thus for him in the Indian village these were:

- a) castes working on land
- b) artisans and service classes

The castes working on land produced a surplus which according to Marx, they gave to the artisan castes. These in turn gave the former a part of the traditional craft. Thus both castes produced for their own needs and for exchange, and harmony prevailed. This "village republic" model has since been criticized as utopic.



Castes are placed in a hierarchy according to their level of purity

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Outline the early Sociological explanation of caste according to Karl Marx in about five lines.

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In the case of Max Weber, caste was considered to be a 'status groups' whose group members were recognized by their social, and economic position. These entailed a particular life-style, which in itself was curtailed by certain restrictions on interaction, including the kind of work which could be done. The relationship between castes was also determined by the ritual opposition between the states of 'purity' and 'pollution' which could be associated with persons or objects. Thus castes were placed in a hierarchy according to their level of purity. Thus the Brahmins level of purity was highest as they followed 'clean' occupations such as priesthood. It was important too that the 'purity' be maintained through avoidance of those who were impure. For this reason Weber argued that caste was an extreme form of stratification.

For Bougle who wrote after Weber a caste was recognized by its place in the hierarchy and by the occupation its members followed. Castes were constrained and other social restrictions that were imposed upon them. Thus hierarchy and separation between groups were the attributes that helped maintain the status of a caste in the hierarchy order and determined interactional patterns.

19.3 ATTRIBUTIONAL APPROACHES TO CASTE

We now turn to some other scholars who used the early insights of Marx Weber and Bougle to develop what has come to be known as the "attributional approach". Attributional approach discusses primarily the significant features of the caste system qua system and what distinguishes it from other forms of the social stratification.

Attributes are inherent inalienable qualities associated with the caste system. As such every caste must necessarily partake of these attributes.

19.3.1 G.S Ghurye

Ghurye wrote in the 1930's and considered that each caste was separated from the other in a hierarchical order. This ordering sprang legitimately from its attributes of a caste. These were:

- i) **Segmental Division.** Thus membership to a caste group is acquired by birth and with it come the position in the rank order relative to other castes.
- ii) **Hierarchy.** Following from the above society was arranged in rank orders, or relations of superiority or inferiority. Thus Brahmins were accepted as highest in the hierarchy and untouchables at the very bottom.
- iii) **Caste Restrictions.** These were placed on every caste which gave permission to its members only to interact with particular groups of people. This included its dress, speech, customs, rituals and from who they could accept food. The system was geared to maintain purity of the group members, hence of the caste group itself.
- iv) **Caste Pollution.** In this idea the whole effort of a caste was to avoid contamination from polluting objects (those involved unclean occupations, or of the lowest caste). This shunning of pollution is reflected in the residential separation of the caste groups.
- v) **Traditional Occupation.** Ghurye felt that every caste had a traditional occupation the clean castes had clean occupations whereas the unclean and impure caste had defiling ones.
- vi) **Endogamy.** This trait of the castes was very distinct and essential to keeping it together as a group that maintained its own distinct character. Essentially it maintained that one could only marry within ones caste.

Thus through six attributes Ghurye sought to define the process by which a caste group maintained its caste identity. By preserving the various attributes of segmental division, hierarchy, caste restrictions, caste pollution, traditional occupation, and marriage within a

Activity 1

Discuss the attributes of caste according to G. S. Ghurye with fellow students. Note down your findings in your notebook.

19.3.2 J.H. Hutton

Hutton had described the caste structure in his book *Caste in India*. Hutton held that the central feature of the caste system was endogamy. Around this fact are built up the various restrictions and taboos. Interaction must not violate these restrictions placed on the various castes. Another important feature of the caste system as seen by Hutton was the taboo on taking cooked food from any caste but one's own. Such restrictions raise questions in themselves:

- i) Who cooks the food?
- ii) What type of pot was the food cooked in?
- iii) Is the food "kaccha" uncooked or (cooked in water) or "pakka" (fried in oil). The latter is acceptable from other castes as well.
- iv) There is a hierarchy of food and vegetarian food is ranked higher than non vegetarian food. Brahmins are usually vegetarian but not everywhere in Bengal and Kashmir Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food as well.

These restrictions reflect the process of the formation of caste identity. They are reflective of separation and hierarchy between the caste groups. Thus non-acceptance of food reflects superiority of rank. The whole idea of maintaining 'purity' and reducing 'pollution' is also found to permeate the interactions.

In parts of the South India for instance the fear of pollution gets translated into physical distance being maintained between the superior and inferior caste. Again the castes low in rank order have to avoid village temples and well and maintain a physical distance in their interaction with higher caste members. Thus Hutton explains caste interactions with the notion of attributes of a caste, primarily in terms of endogamy, purity and impurity and restrictions on commensality. You will have noticed the overlap in Ghurye's Hutton's approaches.

19.3.3 M.N. Srinivas

Before proceeding further it may be mentioned that the scholars using the attributional approach stress the attributes of a caste. However each of them lays emphasis on one or other of these attributes and how they affect interaction. In the case of Srinivas writing in the 50's we find that he chooses to study the structure of relations arising between castes on the basis of these attributes. Thus he introduces a dynamic aspect of caste identity very forcefully.

This aspect becomes clearer in Srinivas's work on positional mobility known as 'Sanskritization'. Sanskritization is a process whereby a caste attempts to raise its rank within the caste hierarchy by adopting in practice, the attributes of the caste or castes above them, in the rank order. This is to say the 'low' attributes are gradually dropped and the 'high' attributes of the castes above them are imitated. This involves adoption of vegetarianism, clean occupations of so on.

Closely connected is the concept of dominant caste. The dominant caste in a village is conspicuous by its :

- i) Sizeable numerical presence
- ii) Ownership of land
- iii) Political power.

Thus a dominant caste has numerical significance as well as economic and political power. It is also interesting to note that the dominant caste need not be the highest ranking caste in the village caste hierarchy. The dominant caste commands the service of all other castes.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Give a summary of the attributional theory of caste according to M.N. Srinivas in about 10 lines.

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19.4 INTERACTIONAL APPROACHES TO CASTE

Interaction approach takes into account how castes are actually ranked with respect to one another in a local empirical context.

We have already seen how attributes of a caste be used as a approach to study caste. It would also have come clear to your that a set of attributes denotes its own interactional processes. Thus we cannot say that attributes have no bearing or interaction. On the other hand we find that the interaction too has its attributional aspects. So the questions comes down to which of these aspects in emphasized more than the other, and given primacy in analyzing the caste dynamics and identity formation. Let us study some of the pioneering works so for a interactional approaches to the study of caste are concerned.

19.4.1 F.G. Bailey

Bailey feels that caste dynamics and identity are united by the two principles of segregation and hierarchy. He feels that “Castes Stand in ritual and secular hierarchy expressed in the rules of interaction”. The ritual system overlaps the political and economic system.

Box 19.02

The relationship between castes does not comprise rituals alone-there is a power dimension because there exists a dominant caste to which other castes are subordinate. Rank and caste identity are expressed by a lower caste attempting to emulate a caste which is higher in rank. Thus the interaction pattern becomes indicative of ritual status the rank order hierarchy. Interactional pattern itself involves attitudes and practices towards the question of acceptance and non acceptance of food, services, water, smoking together, seating arrangements at feasts and the exchange of gifts.

Bailey explained his viewpoint with reference to village Bisipara in Orissa; and showed how the caste situation in Bisipara become changed and more fluid after Independence when the Kshatriyas lost much of their land. This caused a downslide in their ritual ranking as well. There was a clearly discernable change in the interaction patterns which we have delineated above e.g. acceptance and non acceptance of food from other castes.

Mayer studied Ramkheri village in Madhya Pradesh. To understand the effect on caste hierarchy Mayer observed interactive between castes in term of:

- i) Commensality of eating drinking water and smoking
- ii) Food type exchanged whether is 'kaccha' or 'pakka'
- iii) Context of eating, ritual or otherwise
- iv) Seating arrangements at eating
- v) Who provides food and who cooked it
- vi) The vessel in which water is given - metal or earthen.

Thus the commensal hierarchy is based on the belief that any or all of the above factors can lead to greater or lesser pollution for a caste thus affecting its identity and ranking in the hierarchy order. Those at the top of the hierarchical order will ensure that only a caste or type of food and water vessel which will not pollute them is accepted or used by them. For example pakka food may be accepted from a lower caste but kaccha food will be accepted only from within the same caste or subcaste.

19.4.3 M. Marriott

Marriott analyses caste hierarchy with reference to the local context. Marriott studied the arrangement of caste ranking in ritual interaction. Marriott confirmed that ritual hierarchy is itself linked to economic and political hierarchies. Usually economic and political ranks tend to coincide. That is to say both ritual and non-ritual hierarchies affect the ranking in the caste order though ritual hierarchies tend to play a greater role. In this way a consensus emerges regarding caste ranking and this is collectively upheld. It must be made clear here that this process is not as clear cut as it first seems. This is because the sociologist enters the field when this process of caste ranking is in its full blown form and he or she does not observe the historical process and took place by deduces or infers about the same, from the data that is available on hand.

Marriott studied Kishan Garhi and Ram Nagla two villages in the Aligarh District of U.P. in 1952. Marriott's study showed that there is consensus about caste ranking in these villages. The basis on which this is done is on the observation of ritual of ritual interaction, in the village itself.

In the villages Marriott studied we find that the important indicators of rank are:

- i) Giving and receiving of food
- ii) Giving and receiving of honorific gestures and practices
- iii) Thus Brahmins are ranked high since they officiate at the most exclusive and important rituals. They simultaneously receive all services from the other castes. Again Brahmins accept only "pakka" food from another group of high castes. Thus a caste can be considered high if Brahmins accept 'pakka' food from them and low if Brahmins accepting 'kaccha' food from them. There were ten such 'high' castes in Kishan Garhi and four such 'high' castes in Ram Nagla. The lowest caste does not receive any service from other castes, but has to provide its services to all other castes and had made it a practice to accept 'Kaccha' food from them as well.

Activity 2

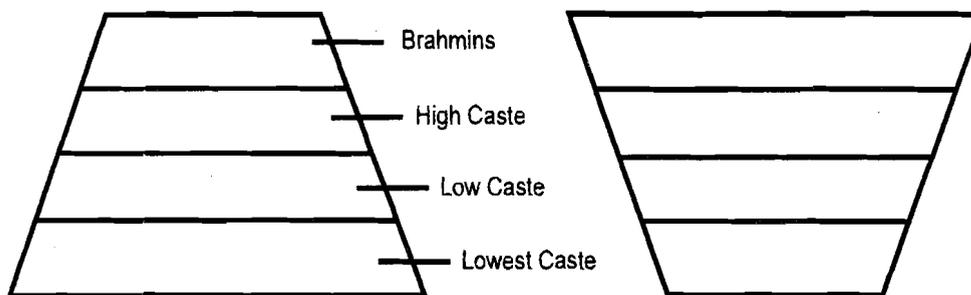
Discuss the important indicators of rank according to Mayer and Marriott with students and friends. Note down your discoveries in your notebook.

Food and services, and how they are offered and accepted are therefore major indicators of caste ranking. However Marriott observed that there were rules also about :

- i) smoking together,
- ii) the arrangement of the housing complex
- iii) details and bodily contact
- iv) feasting and the order in which the food is served.

In Kishan Garhi political and economic dominance matched the ritual hierarchy. Let us see how ritual status and economic power (land ownership) overlap:

Rank and Land Ownership in Kishan Garhi



Thus there is a tendency among castes to transform their political and economic status into ritual status.

However inconsistencies can and do exist. This gives room for social mobility. Again, though it is true that the local interaction is important, but a reference to other villages can also help determined local rank. However, by and large the ritual hierarchy tends to be consistent with political and economic dominance. Interaction sustains a given ranking order which can be witnessed in the various facts that have been mentioned.

19.4.4 L. Dumont

Dumont added a new dimension to the studies of caste in an interactional perspective. His study of caste emphasizes relations between castes rather than attributes. Attributes can be only be explained with reference to the relationship between castes. According to Dumont the local context has a role in caste ranking and identity, but this is a response to the ideology of hierarchy which extends over the entire caste system. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic, political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. For Dumont caste is a special type of inequality and hierarchy is the essential value underlying the caste system, and it is this value that integrates Hindu society.

The various aspects of the caste, says Dumont are based on the principle of opposition between the pure and impure underlying them. 'Pure' is superior to the 'impure' and has to be kept separate. Thus the caste system appears to be rational to those because of the opposition between the pure and the impure.

Dumont also feels that hierarchy in the caste system indicates ritual status without accepting the influences of wealth or power authority. Thus hierarchy is the principle through which the elements are ranked in relation to the whole. Ranking is basically religious in nature. In Indian society Status (Brahmins) has always been separated from power (King). To go further, power has been subordinated to 'status'. The king is subordinate to the priest, but both are dependent on each other. Thus hierarchy is something ritualistic in nature and supported by religion. Only when power is subordinated to status, can this type of pure hierarchy develop. The Brahmins who represents purity is superior and at the top of the whole system. But the Brahmin along with the king opposes all the other categories of the Varna system.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society For Dumont the Jajmani system of economic interaction is a ritual expression rather than an economic arrangement. Jajmani system is the religious expression of inter dependence where interdependence itself is derived from religion. Similarly, commensal regulations emphasize hierarchy rather than separation. However, the question of purity does not arise on all such occasions of commensality. Thus the washerman is a 'purifier' and can enter the house freely. But he cannot attend a marriage party with similar caste.

Let us appraise now both the attributional and interactional approaches.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Briefly outline Dumont's theory of interactional caste ranking in ranking in about 10 lines.

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19.5 ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTION APPROACHES: AN APPRAISAL

We are now in a position to point out some of the anomalies found in both the attributional and interactional approaches. Let us take first the attributional approach.

- i) M. Marriott points out that there were cases in Kishangarhi where the castes he examined did not seem to derive their position in the social hierarchy from their attributes. Thus he found that diet and occupational restrictions in some cases did not negate caste rank or identity.
- ii) Again the placement of castes in Kishan Garhi did not follow from highness and lowness of occupation. Thus the facts did not fit the theory.
- iii) There may in fact be discrepancies between attribute of a caste and its rank. Thus in a Mysore village studied by Srinivas the traders caste is vegetarian and follows a clean occupation relative to the peasants. Yet peasants are ranked about traders.
- iv) There is also the problem of which of the attributes is more and which of the attributes is less important for ranking of castes.

It was due to these anomalies that the interactional approach was proposed as an alternative to the attributional approach. This has been presented earlier but is itself subject to some problems. Let us turn to these now.

- i) The interactional approach subsumes within it the importance of attributes. Thus interaction alone cannot account for rank without reference to attributes
- ii) Apart from Dumont interaction theory localizes hierarchy and propounds that ranking is an outcome of interaction. Thus there is an emphasis on separation rather than hierarchy. Dumont's position is that the ideology of purity and pollution relates to the whole of Hindu society rather just a part of it.

- iii) In the case of Dumont however the work is historical to a large extent, and the caste system appears to have remained stagnant over the ages, which is not true.
- iv) Although Dumont makes a clear separation between 'power' and 'status' it has also been argued that power has been historically converted to status.
- v) Finally the view of the caste as a university accepted ordered system of values (ideology) does little justice to the protest movements that have questioned caste division itself. The element of conflict is missing while the integrative function of caste is highlighted

19.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explored the features of caste rank and identity. We began with early explanations of caste, including the religious and sociological explanations. We then moved on to a presentation of the attribution approaches to caste including those of Ghurye, Hutton, and Srinivas. Following this we described the interactional alternative to caste ranking and identity, including the work of Bailey, Mayer, Marriott and Dumont. Having presented this view we appraised both of the approaches to caste ranking and identity, and found that there difficulties present in both. It is clear however that the work. Discussed presents a tremendous advance over the early religious and sociological explanations of caste hierarchy and ranking.

19.7 KEY WORDS

Attributes	: Qualities and features
Commensality	: Eating together or sitting together
Dominant Caste	: A caste which is influential in a village due to its economic and political power.
Endogamy	: Marriage only within a particular groups
Hierarchy	: Rank order in which items are arranged from high to low
Ideology	: A coherent consistent of set of ideas
Jajmani System	: Custom of ritualised, personal, specialized services offered by the dependent castes to the dominant castes.
Kaccha food	: Food that is uncooked, or cooked in water
Pakka food	: food cooked in ghee or oil
Pollution	: A state created by coming into contact with 'unclean' items or castes
Purity	: A state of ritual cleanliness, or being free from all polluting things and persons.

19.8 FURTHER READINGS

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Mandelbaum D. G. 1987 *Society in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Marriott, M. 1959, "Interactional and Attributional Theories of Caste Ranking" in *Man in India* Vol. 34, No. 2.

Srinivas M.N. 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

19.9 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Early Sociological explanations regarding explanation of caste were notable for moving away from strictly religious explanations. Thus in the work of Karl Marx it was the relationship to ownership of land that determined the group's position in Society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Srinivas sees caste as a segmentary system. All castes are divided into sub-castes which are; i) endogamous; ii) have common occupation; iii) are units of social and ritual life; iv) follow a common culture; v) are governed by the village council or 'Panchayat'. The factors of hierarchy, caste occupation commensality and restrictions, principle of pollution and caste panchayat are also considered by Srinivas. Thus Srinivas's concept of 'Sanskritization' talks of a lower caste emulating higher caste attributes in order to rise higher within the ranking system.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) For Dumont the ideology of purity and pollution is a general one and not confined to any local context alone. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. Hierarchy is the essential value underlying the caste system and it is this value that integrates Hindu Society. Caste has the principle of pure and impure underlying it.

'Pure' is superior to 'impure' and has to be kept separate. For Dumont power has been subordinated to status and thus the king is subordinate to the priest. Hierarchy is thus ritualistic and supported by religion.