



Caste System in India - Continuity and Change

Dr. Mohan Nagrale
Head & Associate Professor,
Sociology, Dharampeth Arts and Commerce College,
Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society is stratified based on caste and class. We lay more emphasis on the caste system, as it is very specific to the Indian culture. It is a form of stratification found among the Hindus, and is closely connected to the Hindu philosophy and religion. Caste system has its origin in the Varna system, which divided the society into four divisions. It has its basis in the four-fold Varnas-the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, and includes the untouchables as a fifth category. Though Varna system and caste system differ, caste system has its foundation in the Varna system. Within each Varna, there are various sub-groups, which are directed by customs and traditions and rules of marriage.

Caste is derived from the Portuguese word "casta," meaning "chaste" or "pure breed" and originally used to refer to a social division in Hindu society. It is based on the Hindu philosophy, morals, occupations, manners, food and dress habits, and marriage and family patterns. Ram Ahuja views caste as a closed social stratum that determines its members' prestige, occupation, and social relationships. In each caste, social relations between members of different castes are severely limited and formalized.

Definitions of Caste

Caste is a collection of families, bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human and divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community.

-Herbert Risley

Caste is defined as an endogamous and hereditary sub-division of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions.

-Kroeber

Caste is a closed corporation, rigorously hereditary, bound with others (castes) by common occupation and equipped with a council that rules its members by the sanction of certain penalties.

-Senart

A caste is a group having two characteristics; (I) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born, (II) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.

-Ketkar

Caste is that extreme form of social class organization in which the position of individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth.

-Anderson and Parker

Thus, various thinkers have defined in different ways. It would be a difficult task to give a definite or permanent definition of caste. The best way to understand the term "caste" is to examine the various features or characteristics of the caste system.

Features of Caste System

Some of the important features of the caste system are:

1. **Segmental divisions of the society:** In a caste bound society, the degree of community feeling is restricted to one's own caste. In day-to-day affairs, such as marriage feasts or death, the members depend on the caste fellows. The members owe their moral allegiance to their caste first, rather than the community as a whole. The caste system thus divides the society into segments.
2. **Caste is ascribed:** Caste groups have a well-developed life of their own, and membership into castes are not determined by selection but by birth. The social mobility is very rigid in case of the caste. The membership into a particular caste does not change even if a person rises in his status, occupation, wealth etc.
3. **Social hierarchy:** The caste system is a hierarchical division of the Hindu society, with the Brahmin caste being ranked at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and finally the Sudras. In every part of India, there is a definite and established scheme of social precedence among castes, with one following the other in a system of ranking.
4. **Endogamy:** It refers to marital restrictions within one's own caste group. In general, caste groups have a rigid attitude towards inter-caste marriages, which are neither allowed nor accepted. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras all marry within their own castes.
5. **Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse:** In order to maintain superiority and ceremonial purity of their own caste the higher castes set certain restrictions on the acceptance of food and the communication between them and the lower castes. With regard to the acceptance of food from the other castes, the Brahmin could accept "pucca" food (where the medium of cooking is pure ghee) from only a few caste groups. The Brahmin did not accept "Kachcha" food (which has been cooked only in water) from any other caste, though other caste groups in practice did not have any objection in accepting Kachcha food from the Brahmins. It was believed by the higher

castes that their own caste is 'pure' and any kind of communication or contact with the lower castes would defile them. Thus, the members of higher castes maintained distance and placed several restrictions on the members of lower castes. Even their shadows were not tolerated by the higher castes, as their shadows would pollute them. For this reason they were not allowed into the village during daytime, they need to complete their works before sunrise or after sunset. In many places, there is a stated distance to be maintained between lower caste members and the upper castes (in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra).

6. Occupations fixed by caste: The caste system is based on the Varna system. In the Varna system, each Varna is supposed to have a functional role. The Brahmins need to carry on with the Vedic education and performing religious rituals, the Kshatriyas were expected to protect the country and be a warrior, the Vaishyas were to carry on trade, and the Sudras were to render their services for the higher castes and were supposed to carry on the menial work. The Varna system was not a hierarchical division of society, but was based on individual capabilities to do certain kinds of work. The Varna system degenerated into the caste system. Thus, most of these occupations came to be associated with specific castes, and the castes started considering these occupations as hereditary. The members of a particular caste cannot change to other occupations. The abandonment of hereditary occupation was not thought to be right. Thus, only the Brahmin could study and teach, only Kshatriya could become a warrior, a Vaishya could only carry on trade, and a Sudra could do only menial work. In Hindu society, in most cases, we could see a carpenter's son become a carpenter and the son of a blacksmith becomes a blacksmith, and so on.
7. Civic and religious disabilities: As the lower castes were considered impure, many civic and religious disabilities were imposed on them. They were not allowed to draw water from the public wells. They were made to live in the outskirts of the village. They were restricted from entering temples. The lower castes could not study the sacred literature.

THEORIES OF ORIGIN OF CASTE SYSTEM

A number of theories have been advocated regarding the origin of caste system in India. In this section, we will look into some of these theories, such as the Divine origin theory, the Varna theory, the Racial theory, and the Colour theory.

The Traditional or the Divine Origin Theory

It has been opined that Hindus explain everything in terms of God and religion. It is believed that Brahma the Supreme being and Creator created man, from various parts of his body. From his head/mouth emerged the Brahmins; from the shoulders/arms emerged the Kshatriyas; from the abdomen/thighs emerged the Vaishyas, and from his feet emerged the Sudras. Since the Brahmins are associated with Brahma's head and mouth, they are given the attributes of intelligence and power of speech. This is one of the reasons that Brahmins are considered to be the most capable of learning and teaching the religious scriptures. The Kshatriyas, who emerged from the shoulders and arms of Brahma are considered to be strong

and brave, and could therefore be given the responsibility of protecting the community with valour and courage. The Vaishyas who emerged from the abdomen and thighs of the Creator and are associated with the characteristics of movement and provision of food. They are thus the traders, producers, and craftsmen. The Sudras who emerged from the feet of the Supreme Being was fit only for hard labour and menial work.

This theory can also be viewed in a different way. According to Susan Bayly (p. 30) it is in the Vedas that the earliest ideas of caste can be seen. In the Rig Veda, there is a famous section that describes the primordial act of blood sacrifice of the thousand-eve the Purusa, the first created man. From the dismembered fragments of the sacrifice Purusa emerged the four Varnas.

When they divided the Purusa, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are his thighs (loins) and feet called? The Brahmin was his mouth, his two arms were made the rajanya (Kshatriya, king and warrior), and his two thighs (loins) the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra (servile class) was born.

The Varna Theory

The varna theory regards Varnas to be the basis of the caste system. The Rig Veda mentions the division of society into three orders or Varnas—the Brahma (priests), the Kshatra (warriors), and the Vis (common people). There is a reference to certain other groups like the Ayogya, Chandala, and the Nishada, which later formed the fourth Varna or the Sudras. The untouchables were included much later as a fifth category. The Varna system was a categorization of society on the basis of one's capacities, skills, and capabilities. Any person who could learn and teach the religious scriptures could become a Brahmin. Similarly, a person who was strong and skilled in the art of warfare became a Kshatriya. People who were good at trading became the Vaishyas and those who did physical or menial work became the Sudras. A Sudra was employed not only as a domestic servant, but also as a cook. In the Vedic period, there was no higher or lower varna. The division of society into the four Varnas, four orders or classes was based on the division of labour. There were no restrictions on social relations or matrimonial alliances between the Varnas. Mobility between the Varnas was easy and frequent. Over a period of time, each occupation was associated with a specific varna. Thus, a Brahmin could only learn, reside, and teach the religious scriptures and officiate as a priest in religious functions and ceremonies, a Kshatriya could become only a warrior, a Vaishya a trader, and a Sudra a menial worker.

Gradually, instead of teaching their skills to others, members of each Varna probably found it more practical to teach their skills to their offspring. Thus, a Brahmin started teaching his son the art of reciting and teaching the Vedas, a Kshatriya started teaching his son the art of warfare, a Vaishya taught his son the various skills of trade and commerce. These skills over a period of time got categorized with each Varna. In order to maintain the control over specific skills each Varna became more and more closed, denying access to their particular skill to any outsider. This resulted in making the Varna system more and more rigid and a stratified and hierarchical division of the Indian society emerged which came to be known as the Caste system. It became hierarchical because the Brahmin Varna or caste claimed superiority over all other castes, followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and the Sudras.

The Racial Theory

Certain social scientists state that the caste system emerged in India after arrival of the Aryans. These Aryans tried to maintain their superior position in society as the basis of their fair colour, categorizing all other groups as Dasas because of their relatively dark complexion. These Indo-Aryan groups used the words "Varna" and "colour. Thus mention of the Arya Varna and the Dasa Varna can be seen even in the religious scriptures of India such as the Rig Veda, which stresses on the differences between the Aryas and the Dasas not only on the basis of colour but also in terms of their living habits, speech, physical features, and religious practices. The three classes of Brahma, Kshatra, and Vis are frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda, though the term Sudra is hardly mentioned. The Brahma class represented the profession of the poet-priest, the Kshatra represented the warrior-chief the Vis were the common people and the Sudras represented domestic servants who were more or less like slaves. The Brahmins were considered to be the most superior of all the Varnas followed by the Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudras.

The Colour Theory

There is one viewpoint that bases the hierarchical arrangement in society on colour differences. According to this viewpoint, Varna means "colour," and this term was probably used in contrasting the Aryans and the Dasas, referring to their fair and dark colours, respectively. This differentiation on the basis of colour gained importance, and later all the Varnas or classes came to be described as categories based on different colours which differentiates one Varna from another. The Brahmins were associated with the colour white, which denoted purity of thought and action. The Kshatriyas were associated with the colour red that denotes emotions such as anger and aggression, one of the emotions associated with warfare and courage. Vaishyas are associated with the colour yellow, associated with movement, and the Sudras are associated with the colour black, which denotes dirt.

There are some sociologists who believed that the distinction on the basis of colour is associated with race. However, there are others who believe that the colour has a ritual and not a racial significance.

Occupational Theory

According to the occupational theory, the caste system has its origin in the nature and quality of work performed by different categories of people, or their occupations. According to Nesfield (Vidya Bhushan and D.R. Sachdeva, p. 382), "function and function alone is responsible for the origin of caste structure in India." He maintains that the skills associated with each occupation was hereditary, passed on from generation to generation and because of occupational guilds came into existence which later on came to be known as caste. It became hierarchical as a result of a feeling of superiority or inferiority of the occupations. Functional differentiation resulted in occupational differentiation and each caste came to be associated with a specific occupation. The occupation or profession regarded as more respectable made

the persons who performed them superior to those engaged in less respectable occupations. Thus, the occupation of teaching the Vedas and acting as priests was given maximum respectability and, therefore, the Brahmin group was considered the best among other categories. The occupations of the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas were next in the hierarchy of respectability and the work of the Sudras was least respected. Thus, the caste system came to be associated with the respectability accorded to each caste occupation.

The Guild Theory

The theory was propounded by Nesfield and supported by Denzil Ibbetson. Denzil Ibbetson, who stated that castes are modified form of guilds, advocated this theory. According to him, the interaction of three specific groups, i.e., tribes, guilds, and religion resulted in the emergence of caste system. Tribes adopted certain specific professions and formed guilds specifically the priests who enjoyed considerable respect and privilege. This group was endogamous in nature and hereditary. Other guilds also adopted the same practices and procedures, and in course of time became castes.

TRANSFORMATION OF CASTE SYSTEM

Ram Ahuja (Indian Social System, p. 269–82), viewed that for discussing the transformation of caste system, it is necessary to divide history into four periods.

They are:

1. Ancient period, which includes Vedic, Brahmanical, Maurya, post-Maurya periods and Harshavardhana periods.
2. Medieval period, which includes Rajput and Muslim periods.
3. British period, which includes pre-industrial and pre-independence periods.
4. Post-Independence period.

Caste System in Ancient Period

There are two schools of thought in regard to the caste system in the Rig Vedic period. One school holds that the broad frame of the caste system had existed even in the earliest portion of the Rig Veda and the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas were the three caste divisions, which were clearly recognized by the Rig Vedic society. However, according to this view, Sudra caste did not exist in this period. The Aryans created it at the end of the Rig Vedic period. The other school maintains that these three were not castes but Varnas, which were not hereditary, but flexible. They held that the caste system did not exist in the Rig Vedic period. B. R. Kamble (Caste and Philosophy in Pre-Buddhist-India, 1979; p. 16) has recently held that the caste system was sufficiently developed in the Rig Vedic period and this system was not flexible but had raised enough barriers.

The Later Vedic age marks the growth of religious literature, which includes the Brahmanas and the older Upanishads. The hierarchical system of Varnas was established firmly

during this period. This period witnessed the growth of Brahmin privileges, which they won through the instrument of religion. Due to the rise of big states, the power of Kshatriyas over the Vaishyas and the Sudras increased. However, there was discontentment among the Kshatriyas due to their secondary position to that of the Brahmins. As a result there arose conflicts between Brahmins and Kshatriyas for claiming superiority over the other. The theory of four castes came to be repeatedly mentioned in the literature of this period, and the four castes became clearly established and rigid.

During the epic age, the Brahmins took advantage of the wars among Kshatriyas themselves and succeeded in organizing themselves as an exclusive class. Therefore, the beginning of caste system was the later Vedic age and the Epic age. The basis of social stratification was division of labour; therefore, in its original form it was the class system rather than caste system. The racial factor, the occupational bias, the philosophy of action, and the religious concept of purity and pollution, contributed to the formation of caste system.

During the Maurya period, caste system could not grow due to the liberal attitudes of the rulers such as Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka Kautilya, a Brahmin minister of Chandragupta Maurya who was a Sudra ruler, tried to remove various restrictions imposed by the Brahmins on the Sudras by declaring that the royal law would supersede the Dharma law. During Ashoka's reign animal sacrifices were prohibited and Vedic ritualism was completely ruled out.

After the downfall of the Maurya dynasty, the Sunga dynasty under the ruler Pushyamitra Sunga came to power, and this period marked the revival of Brahmanical religion and caste system. It was through the writings of Manusmriti and other smritis that the Vedic rites were revived and Brahmins, giving themselves special privileges and imposing severe restrictions on the Sudras. The Golden Age of the Guptas marked the real development of the Brahmanism, which became the ethnic religion of India and caste system got a fresh spur. The caste system was not so rigid in this period as the Sudras were allowed to become traders, artisans, and agriculturists. However, untouchability existed in this period and the untouchables were made stay outside the main settlements. The caste system with the domination of the Brahmins continued to function in the same manner in the Harshavardhana period, which is evident from the writings of the Chinese scholar, Hieun Tsang.

Caste System in the Medieval Period

The medieval period includes the Rajput period and the Muslim period. The Indian social system did not change and, moreover, caste system became more rigid. Brahmins gave themselves more privileges and permitted flesh, wine, and women in worship. The Rajputs were loyal to their clans and to die in the battlefield for clan's honour was esteemed as a personal triumph. Consequently, when foreign armies attacked India, each individual clan faced them singly with disastrous results for the country. As a result, a large number of castes and sub-castes came up. This further resulted in the caste subdivisions among the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. In due course, a large number of occupational castes originally started only as occupational guilds came to be regarded as distinct castes or sub-castes. Thus, distinct change has occurred in our social structure with regard to multiplicity of castes and the observance of caste rules before the advent of Muslims.

During the Muslim rule, India no longer remained a peaceful home for the safe pursuit

of Brahminism. Islam being a monotheistic religion did not allow any compromise with polytheism. The Hindus and Muslims therefore could not mix together. Since Muslims led a religious crusade upon India and tried to convert people to Islam, the Brahmins in order to protect the Hindus from being converted imposed many restrictions on Hindus and made caste system more rigid. Brahmins had a control over the temples, which was used in this period not only for worship but also for political, cultural, and educational activities, and this was the reason why Brahmins succeeded in imposing their control over the Hindus. Caste distinctions were made more rigid by declaring that Muslims and those Hindus who worked for the Muslims would be treated as malech.

Caste System in the Pre-Industrial British Period

During the seventeenth century the East India Company (the Britishers) secured some commercial privileges from the Mughals. Soon, the Britishers were successful in conquering India and Warren Hastings was appointed as the first Governor General of India. The administrative, socio-economic policies of the government and some of the legislative measures taken brought about changes in our religious doctrines and practices and also in the caste structure of the society. The judicial powers of the caste councils or caste panchayats were transferred to the civil and criminal courts, which affected the authority of these panchayats held over their members. The Britishers also removed some of the disabilities of the untouchables through some social measures, which gave further blow to the caste system. All these measures were taken up by the Britishers for their own administrative convenience and not because they desired to abolish caste system. Some of the acts such as Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and the Special Marriage Act of 1872 also attacked caste system.

Some of the social reformers started social reform movements like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, which attacked the caste system and some of them aimed at the revival of aggressive Hinduism. The Lingayat movement started by a Brahmin Vasava in South India also preached against the superiority of the Brahmins, abolition of idol-worship and giving up of the caste system. However, all these attacks did not succeed in removing the rigidity of the caste system, but some of the structural features of caste were definitely affected.

Caste System in Pre-Independence Period

Many of the customs related to caste continued to flourish as the Britishers adopted a hands off policy to produce planned social change. They did very little to modify India's religious and social customs. Men at the top of the caste hierarchy were confirmed in their prerogatives (privileges) and powers over the destinies of their fellows. After the World War, India became more and more industrialized which resulted in the largescale migration from rural to urban areas, thus the process of Urbanization. These two factors of industrialization and urbanization played a major role for the changes that occurred in caste system.

Industrialization, which has led to the growth of industries, destroyed the old crafts and paved for new means to earn livelihood. It also created new transportation facilities, specially

crowded trains and buses, which threw millions of people of all castes leaving aside the ceremonial purity of the castes. Taboos against some food and accepting food and water from persons of other castes gradually started weakening when industrial workers belonging to various castes started living together in the same house leaving their families behind in villages. However, the impact of industrialization has not been uniform and absolute on all the salient features of the caste system. The process of industrialization did not have any effect on the marriage customs and beliefs as they are considered as deep-rooted social values.

Urbanization, which has led to the growth of cities and the developed means of transport and communication considerably, changed the functioning of the caste in India. The authority of Brahmins has also come to be questioned. Referring to this, M. N. Srinivas has stated that due to the migration of Brahmins to the towns, the non-Brahmins refuse to show the same respect, which they showed before, and inter-caste eating and drinking taboos are weakened. Ghurye also accepted the changes in the rigidities of caste system due to the growth of city life with its migratory population.

Caste System in Post-Independence Period

After independence of the country, the important factors, which affected the castesystem are the merger of various states, the enactment of several laws, socio-religious reform, spread of education, growth of new and modern professions and occupations westernization, spatial mobility, and the growth of market economy.

However, this period also witnessed the growth of some caste organizations, which have come to be strengthened. Some castes have started consolidating their groups to secure greater social and political power, which has increased the feeling of Casteism. Such feelings have given rise to inter-caste conflicts in some states. Some castes in order to gain advantage over the other castes have started building their own educational, economic, and religious positions. However, the other side of the caste system in post-independence period is that lot of scheduled castes has been improved with the educational and employment opportunities through the reservation policy of the Government. The practice of untouchability has considerably diminished.

CASTE SYSTEM IN PRESENT INDIA

The Indian caste system has been traditionally considered a rigid system of stratification of the Indian society. However, no system can be absolutely rigid; there are bound to be changes that affect any system at different points of time. The caste system has definitely undergone considerable change over the past decades. We shall briefly discuss some of these changes in this section.

- It is generally believed that the caste system is losing its importance in everydaylife, and that modern changes have resulted in its disintegration. However, caste system is neither disintegrating nor disappearing; it continues to be a very important aspect of the Hindu social structure in India.

- Caste continues to persist in India through a system of complex networks of integrated groups and a system of hierarchically arranged social strata, which are endogamous and specialized in terms of rituals and occupations (traditional caste system).
- There has been considerable change in the structure of the caste system. These can be seen in changes in the endogamous characteristic of caste-to a limited extent,exogamy and inter-caste marriages are taking place and are being accepted.
- Changes can be seen in the characteristics of traditional occupation, idea of purity and pollution, restrictions on social and religious contacts. These changes have been further reinforced by industrialization and urbanization.
- There are a number of views regarding the position of caste system in modern India. One view looks at caste system as a rapidly changing social institution is losing its importance in society, though it is not disappearing or disintegrating. Another viewpoint considers caste to be persisting, and changes within it are very slow and gradual. Thus, it is felt that the caste system does not face any abolition but is changing and making adjustments to changes in the social system.
- Caste has lost its hold on the occupation structure-it no longer determines the occupational career of an individual.
- The process of Sanskritization has resulted in upward social mobility of lower caste groups. This movement up the caste hierarchical ladder has increased in frequency and is gaining more and more acceptance.
- Sanskritization, westernization, modernization, urbanization, and secularization have hastened the process of change within the caste system.
- Education and the efforts of social reformers have resulted in tolerance towards other castes and lessened the rigid caste boundaries that existed in earlier times.
- Caste dominance no longer depends upon the ritual status of a caste. Political patronage and economic betterment play an important role in this aspect.
- Caste has become an important feature of Indian politics and both have significantly influenced each other.
- A recent trend has been the increase in Casteism or loyalty towards one's own caste to the detriment of other castes. This has gained momentum because of the politicization of caste.
- Caste has to a certain extent lost its hold on the individual, the family, and the caste group. Restrictions, which were earlier imposed by caste no longer hold good.

A number of efforts have been made by the government to improve the status of the socially and economically backward caste groups. This has been done in terms of reservations in educational institutions and government offices.

References

- Sen, Pujan Kumar, 'Indian Society: Continuity and Change', Pearson, Delhi, 2012.

- Das Veena, 'Handbook of Indian Sociology', Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004.
- Rao Shankar C.N., 'Sociology of Indian Society', S. Chand, New Delhi, 2004.
- Dube S.C., 'Indian Society', National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2000.
- Pandey Vinita, 'Indian Society and Culture', Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2016.
- Kachroo J.L., 'Society in India', Cosmos Bookhive (P) Ltd., Gurgaon, 2000.
- Singh Yogendra, 'Modernization of Indian Tradition', Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2001