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CHAPTER - III

Caste, Village and Forces of
Modernization.

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C H A P T E R - III

Caste, Village and Forces of Modernization

A) Caste :

The caste system is one of the very ancient social institutions in India. It has divided the Hindu society into a multitude of hermetically sealed groups. It is called " the steel frame of Hinduism."¹ Owing to the complexity and diversity of the caste system, it is very difficult to arrive at a satisfactory definition of ' caste '. As pointed out by Dr. G.S.Ghurye, " Much literature on the subject is marred by lack of precision about the use of the term."² Any one definition does not provide a complete picture of the essential features of the caste system. Hence Dr.Ghurye has elaborated six outstanding features of the caste which have been accepted by later sociologists.

1) Segmental Division of Society :

The society is divided into ~~many~~ a large number of castes with a well developed life of their own, the membership of which is determined by the consideration of birth. The status of a person does not depend on his wealth but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he had the fortune of being born. No amount of wealth and no amount of penance or prayer can change his caste status.

In earlier days the caste panchayats used to control over the day-to-day behaviour of the members of the caste. It used to decide civil and criminal matters. With the introduction and extension of the courts of law and the substitution of village panchayats for caste panchayats, the authority of the caste panchayat went on gradually weakening.

2) Hierarchy :

Another principal characteristics of the traditional caste structure is the hierarchical gradation of different caste groups. Everywhere in India, there is a definite scheme of social precedence among the various castes. The Brahmin is at the apex of the hierarchy. In the case of intermediate castes, the order of precedence differs slightly from region to region. The Shudra is at the bottom of the hierarchy.

3) Restrictions on feeding and Social intercourse :

Another element of traditional castesystem is the complex of taboos by which the superior castes try to preserve their ceremonial purity. Thus, there are restrictions on feeding and social intercourse and minute rules are laid down with regard to the kind of food that can be acceptable by a person and the caste.

Dr. Ghurye has further pointed out that caste consciousness, particularly with regard to the untouchable, is stronger in the South than in the North of India.³

4) Civil and religious disabilities
and Privileges :

The most common form of civil and religious disabilities is the segregation of a particular caste or group of castes within the village and the practice of 'untouchability'. Generally, the impure castes are made to live on the outskirts of the village. In southern India certain parts of the town or village are inaccessible to certain castes. It is recorded that in the Maratha's and Peshwa's reign the Mahars and Mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona city between 3 p.m. and 9 a.m. because before 9.00 and after 3.00 their bodies cast too long a shadow, which falling on a member of the higher caste defiles him.

In Gujarat the untouchable castes used to wear a horn as a distinguishing mark.⁴ There are records of a number of practices showing the nature of disabilities experienced by the lower castes. A common form of civil disability was the prohibition to the so called untouchables to draw water from wells used by the members of 'upper' castes. The public schools did not admit impure castes. The Shudras could not study the ~~xxx~~



sacred literature. The untouchables were not allowed to enter the temples. The special privileges of the upper castes are also noteworthy. Brahmins were exempted from capital punishment and when confined in forts, they were more liberally treated than the other classes.⁵

5) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation :

Generally, members of a particular caste were expected to follow the traditional caste occupation. They cannot change over to other occupation. No caste would allow its members to take to any degrading occupation. Similarly, the members of the upper castes would not allow the members of the lower castes to follow their traditional occupation. Thus, no one, not born a Brahmin, was allowed to function as a priest.

6) Restriction on Marriage :

Every caste is sub-divided into sub-caste. These are strictly endogamous in nature. The principle of endogamy is such a dominant aspect of the caste system that it is regarded as " the essence of the caste system ". Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions to this general rule of marrying within one's group because of the practice of hypergamy. Hypergamy implies a desire to give one's daughter in marriage to a member of higher caste. In some parts of Punjab, for instance, a man of

higher caste can marry a girl of lower caste. Excepting the cases of hypergamy each caste has to contract matrimonial alliances within its own limits. Any man violating this rule is put out of his own sub-caste.

In short, one can get an idea of the infinite multiplication of castes from the fact that, in every part of India it is estimated that there are about 200 groups called 'castes' with distinct names. These are further divided into more than two thousand smaller units, generally known as sub-castes. All these units functioned more or less, in a harmonious way. But Professor Ghurye aptly points out, " this harmony was not the harmony of parts but of the units which are rigorously subordinated to one another."

Changes :

As long as Indian society was static the caste system was rigid. But with the advent of British rule, new conditions were created and Indian society began to show signs of new life and dynamism.

The forces of modernization have brought about some basic changes in the traditional caste system. But at the same time there are certain factors contributing towards the strengthening of caste consciousness. We can briefly summarise them

Conditions favourable to the changes - as new values.

- 1) Modern education (2) Industrialization and new occupations
- 3) Urbanization (4) Increase in the importance of wealth
- 5) Social egalitarian movements (6) Increase in the means of communication (7) Political movements (8) New legal machinery
- (9) New social classes (10) Independence- constitution, all citizens are equal, untouchability is an offence.

Conditions favouring the caste system :

- 1) Influence of religion.
- 2) Static nature of Hindu society.
- 3) Elections.
- 4) Special treatment to some castes.
- 5) Lower status to certain occupations.
- 6) Natural tendency to keep the lower classes away from one's own and thereby, maintaining higher and ' pure ' status.

The traditional caste-bound professional classes in the village could not continue to hold on to the rigidity of the caste differences and rules. Under the forces of the new circumstances, these rules had to be relaxed as a matter of convenience.

With the Modernization and Westernization of Indian life, the caste system too had to modernise itself. For example,

during the early and mid-nineteenth century biscuits and bread made in bakeries was not eaten by caste-Hindus. Artificial-ice and aerated drinks were tabooed for the high caste. Now a days, however, even orthodox Hindus love eating biscuits and drinking aerated water made in the factories by low caste Hindus without bothering about caste rules.

On account of many factors the structure of caste has undergone great changes. Gradually, it is losing its rigidity and conservatism. The following are some of the most evident changes -

1) Superiority of High Caste people has declined-

In the social hierarchy of caste system Brahmins were on the top. But now a days to some extent they have lost their social status and influences. Economic and social powers have replaced to a great extent the power of religion. In industries, offices and in other professions ^kskill is preferred than birth. As the caste system, which established the superemacy of Brahmins, was based upon the virtue of birth, such changes brought about a corresponding decline in the caste status of Brahmins.

2) Equality of low caste people with other castes-

It was due to Gandhiji that efforts were made in raising the Harijans from their status and to eradicate untouchability

from the society. Now they have equal rights and equal privileges. This change in the status of Harijans has also brought a profound change in the caste structure.

3) Changes in the restrictions regarding food,
drink and social intercourse -

Modern education, means of communication and industrialization are the important forces which have lessened the restrictions relating to food and drink. Close concentration of people of all castes in big cities, hotels, schools and hospitals have made it very difficult to maintain such restrictions. Besides, practice of different treatment for the persons of the different castes in all the public places has been declared illegal. Thus we find that, though caste still exists, it has lost its rigidity regarding restrictions in various social intercourses and its conservatism.

4) Changes in the Restrictions relating
to Marriage :

The western education, cultural change and participation by women in various occupations brought men and women in a closer touch. Purdha system no longer is the hallmark of chastity. Thus, men of the one caste get the opportunity to know the women of another caste. This has increased the number of intercaste

marriages. In the beginning intercaste marriage was prohibited and it was regarded as a social offence. Moreover the marriage outside the caste used to create problems regarding inheritance of ancestral property. Even now the intercaste marriages are not commonly accepted but there are legal sanctions and increasing social approval to such marriages.

5) Changes in the restrictions regarding Occupations :

Traditionally each distinct caste had its specific occupation or means of livelihood. Now, with ^yfreedom of choosing occupation, universal education and industrializations, caste has not remained as an occupational group. Open technical and professional education has broken the caste barriers. Occupation has no longer been indicative of one's own caste and yet, this is a partial truth. But even at this stage we can not claim that all restrictions on the choice of occupation have been completely removed. Still we find that a Brahmin though he may remain unemployed throughout his life, will not accept the job of a sweeper. Similarly, a Brahmin or a high caste Maratha will not allow a Harijan to perform the duties of their priest.

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B) Traditional Village

India is rightly be called a land of villages. The bulk of her population lives in the villages. Since very early

days the villages in India under specific environmental conditions led almost independent and self-sufficient life. The main characteristics of these traditional villages are described below :

Characteristics of Traditional Indian Villages.

1) Isolation and self-sufficiency :

Almost till the middle of the nineteenth century the villages in India were more or less self contained, isolated and self-sufficient units. The inhabitants of the village had very little to do with the people outside. All of their essential needs were satisfied in the village itself. The self-sufficient village as the basic unit of the economy survived for centuries in India in spite of political convulsions, religious upheavals and devastating wars. Sir Charles Metcalfe points out, " The village communities are little republics having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last themselves where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolution, Hindu, Pathan, the Moghul, Maratha, Sikh, English all the masters change in turn, but the village communities remain the same." ⁶ The village community led an isolated existence because there were no proper transport or communication facilities to link one village to other.

2) Local self-Government :

The villages in ancient India enjoyed a considerable measure of autonomy or self-government. The villagers managed their own affairs through the traditional institution of panchayat. The central government had neither the inclination nor the means for interfering with the self government of villages.

3) Conservatism :

Generally speaking, the rate of social change in villages is very slow as compared to that in cities. The inhabitants of the village are strongly attached to old customs and traditions. Their outlook is primarily conservative and they accept changes with extreme reluctance. They love old ways and are less eager to follow the advice of zealous social reformers regarding their marriage and other customs. According to Biesanz and Biesanz, " In the rural community custom is the king, the folk-way and modes control most of behaviour."⁷

4) Simplicity and uniformity :

Life in a village community is simple and uniform. There are few ambitious men and fewer excitements. The villages lead a uniform life of tilling land and rearing animals. The standard of living is lower than that of the town because means

of earning money are limited. Villagers view land as the most substantial of all heritages. Agriculture is their major occupation.

5) Lack of speciliazation :

In the village as a rule only a predominant type of occupation that is agriculture prevails. Each family bakes its own bread and does its own washing for all the environment, physical as well as social. There is no proper division of labour. A person often works in the field and also employs himself in some sort of domestic industry for a part of year. while practising agriculture as a principal occupation, a farmers family also engages itself in spinning at home.

6) Lack of Social Mobility :

Social mobility in a traditional village is very less. The rural dweller can not raise his status, because it is ascribed status by birth or occupation. The caste element is very strong in village community. So that in a village social climbing is very difficult but in a city it is most prevalent. Sorokin and Zimmerman have aptly said, " The rural community is similar to calm water in a pool and the urban community to boiling water in a kettle. Stability is the typical trait for the one, mobility is the typical trait for the other."⁸

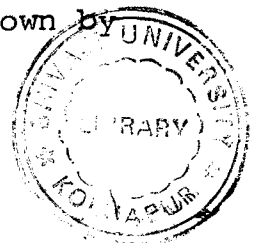
7) Jajamani system :

Caste and sub-caste, being invariably occupational groups, were units producing goods and rendering different services to the members of the village community. Castes which produced goods also used to render some services traditionally. As a result, the dependence of one caste on another was continuous, enduring and indispensable. In the absence of cash economy and competition for occupational position, that is of occupational mobility, the goods and services were distributed on barter basis, the equivalent of the reward or price to the different castes to be paid for the services and goods respectively was fixed in terms of agricultural produce which was to be paid in a lump sum at the end of the year after the harvest. This interdependence of the castes is known as jajamani or baluta system⁹ which was found in traditional Indian society.

C) Forces of Modernization :

Every society has a structure of its own. But it changes whenever new forces of transformation emerge. Similar is the case of Indian rural society.

Modernization in India started mainly with the establishment of British rule. During the 150 years of British rule in India the foundations of modern society were laid down by



the introduction of new technology, the revolution in communication, setting up of uniform law and order and revenue collection machinery, a new educational system, the printing press, new medicine, abolition of existing anti-social customs, and lastly but not the least important, the influence of christian Missionaries."¹⁰

After Independence, the modernization process in India has undergone a basic change from its colonial pattern. As an integral part of developmental strategy, now, modernization has been envisaged at all levels of cultural and structural systems. Community development projects have carried the cultural norms and role- structures of modernity to each and every village in India.¹¹

Due to the forces of modernization, there is great change in the characteristics of traditional Indian village.

The changing political and economic conditions are putting an end to the isolation and self-sufficiency of the Indian village. The rapid development of technology, the means of transport and communication have broken the barriers between the village and the city. The village is now socially and economically connected with the neighbouring city or town. Specially, an agrarian economy is at present in a state of

crisis. Besides the self-sufficient village economy has been disintegrated. Production is not just to meet the requirements of the village community, but it is for the requirements of the market.

Individual is now considered as the unit of society. This shift, therefore, has brought about change in the old religious relations. Traditional religious concepts determine individual behaviour and social control. But development has taken place. With the advent of British rule, Indian society faced a progressive transformation. There is a development of non-religious and secular norms. The authoritarian religious norms, which for ages governed Indian life, are now being replaced by democratic equalitarian ideas.

The villages in India are at present passing through a transitional period. From the sociological point of view the old social relations, bounds and ties have disappeared. The community consciousness is steadily decreasing. Politics of the country has made deep inroads into the peaceful life of the people, and has divided them into political groups. The joint family system is fast disintegrating. The only remaining significant feature of the village community is the predominance of agriculture. But in this context also the modes and agrarian relations are changing.

We have, so far, briefly described the characteristics of Indian village, Indian caste system and the forces of Modernization bringing about change in them. With this background in mind we have to study some of the significant changes in village Masud-Male.

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