C H A P T E R - II

THE CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

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1) **MEANING**:

The word caste is derived from the Spanish word 'Caste'
meaning breed or a complex of heriditary qualities. The
Portugues applied this term to the classes of people in India
known as 'Jati'.

The caste system is the most important social institution
of Hindu society. It is closely connected with Hindu religion,
marriage and family, occupation and employment, food and dress,
habits, morals and manners. In fact, the social, economic and
religious activities of Hindus are to a large extent regulated
and controlled by the caste principles. It is an all pervasive,
deep rooted and long standing social institution.

Caste is a complex phenomenon and it is difficult to
give a scientific explanation of it. Sociologically it can
be studied as a special form of stratification. Different
writers hold different opinions on its origin, definition,
functions, and nature.

The system of stratification in Indian society appears
to be rationalised on the basis of 'Chatur-Varnya doctrine'.
Varna means colour and has a racial significance. There is
a statement in the Purusha Sukta in the Rig-Veda, which states
that the Brahman Varna represented the mouth of Purusha

(creator), Rajanya (Kshatriya) represented his arms, the Vaisya represented his thighs and Shudra his feet. The division of the society into four Varnas is correlated with the duties expected from each Varna.

Mahabharatha also stated that the Purusha consists of Brahmanas in the mouth, Kshatriyas in the arms, Vaishyas in the stomach and Shudras in the feet. Thus the Hindu society is organised in ideal, in a hierarchical manner. Brahmana standing at the top and Shudra at the bottom of the social ladder.

Thus the social divisions among the earlier people in India during the Vedic and Epic periods were thought to be based on Varna principle. At the same time in a vast land like Indian Sub-continent inhabited by several ethnically or racially different people settling together to form a complex society, there was bound to be a stratification system based on differences in terms of occupation, ethnicity, culture, region, language, power, education and such other. Naturally what we find in present complex society in India is a large number of endogagamous castes and sub-castes. It is not necessary to go into the details of the origion of caste system as such as it may not be sufficiently fruitful in our present study.

Instead we shall turn to the precise definition and characteristics of the caste as we come across in the contemporary Indian society.

A sociologist would define caste as a hereditary endogamous usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes.

Dr.G.S.Ghurye, in his ' Caste and Race in India' defines the caste " as an endogamous group of collection of groups, bearing a common name, having a common origin and following a common traditional occupation"[1].

According to Mac-Iver and Page, " When status is wholly predetermined, so that men are born to their lot in life without any hope of changing it, then class takes the form of caste"[2].

C.H.Cooley, also holds that " When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary, we may call it caste".

Dr.D.N.Majumdar and T.N.Madan, have come forward with a simple definition, viz. " A caste is a closed group"[3].

The caste shows two striking features, namely in the first place, a person of one caste is not permitted to marry outside his caste and secondly a person of a particular caste is not permitted to change his occupation or to persue more than one occupation.

2) CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM:

Dr.G.S.Ghurye in his famous book " Caste and Race In India", have analysed the basic characteristics of the caste system in India[4]. They are:

i)   Segmental Division of Society:

Indian society is divided into a number of social groups known as castes. The caste is determined not by selection but by birth. The status of a person depends upon the caste and not upon his wisdom or wealth.

The castes have regular standing councils known as Panchayats for dealing with offences committed by their members. Such offences cover a wide range of subjects like against the established religious practices, violating marriage rules, refusing to act up to caste customs, non payment of debt, etc.

ii)   Hierarchy or Gradation:

It refers to the division of the society into status group on the basis of birth. Hindu society is a gradational, ladder like society. Caste exists mainly on the hierarchical structure in India. Every where in India there is a definite scheme of social precedence amongst the castes, with the Brahmin at the head of the hierarchy and Shudra at the bottom.

In between the Brahmin and the Shudra, the other castes, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya and their respective sub-castes have struggled and still have been struggling for precise social positions in society.

iii)   Restrictions on Feeding and Social Inter-Course:

It refers to the artifical restrictions imposed by caste system on the members in the matter of accepting food and

water and also on free social mixing. Who should accept food and water and at the hands of whom is determined by the caste. For this purpose, all food is divided into two classes,'Kachcha' and 'Pakka', the former being any food in the cooking of which water has been used, and the latter all food cooked in clarified butter without the addition of water.

In general a man of higher caste cannot accept 'Kachcha' food from one of the lower, though the latter may regale himself with similar food offered by a member of one of the castes accepted to be higher than his own[5].

Each individual caste has its own laws which govern the food habits of its members. Generally, there are no restrictions against fruit, milk, butter, dry fruit etc., but, 'Kachcha' food (bread etc.,) can be accepted only from a member of one's own or of a higher caste. The sociological significance of this restriction is that, the superior castes believed and practised the philosophy of untouchability.

iv)   Civil & Religious Disabilities & Privileges of the Different Sections:

Caste groups are segregated in almost all the parts of Indian villages. In the traditional caste society, the higher castes enjoyed superior position, dominated and exploited society for their personal ends, where as the low caste members, the Shudras, the untouchables, the Harijans etc.,

suffered from various disabilities and deprivations. The main disabilities are the social, religious, political and educational. .

Socially the lower caste members were separated and segregated and they were made to live sometimes away from the town or village proper. In Southern India untouchables were not allowed to enter certain areas when high class people were residing. In the Maratha country a Mahar- one of the untouchables was not allowed to spit on the road, because a pure caste Hindu would be polluted by touching it with his foot. Politically, the low caste members were deprived of representation on political bodies. In the matter of religion, the low caste members were deprived of entrance into the temples and other religious institutions.

Again in the matter of education, both teachers and pupils in the schools make it most difficult for low caste boys to sit in the class room.

Therefore, the caste system, the caste principles, the caste consciousness etc., have all proved to be a hindrance or a stumbling block to the development of nationalism, patriotism, unity and solidarity among the members of different social strata.

v)   Restrictions on the Choice of Occupations:

Along with civil and religious restrictions there were
restrictions on the choice of occupations. In traditional
Indian society each caste or a group of allied castes followed
a traditional occupation of its own and this occupation became
hereditary.

According to Manu, " the definite functions of the
Brahmin is to study, teach, to guide and perform religious -
rituals, give and receive alms; that of Kshatriya is to study
perform religious rituals, give alms, punish the evil and
go to war; that of Vaishya is to study, perform religious
rituals, give alms, work in agriculture, trade and animal
husbandry; that of the Shudra is to do menial work for all
other Varnas".

vi)   Restrictions on Marriage:

Every caste is divided into a number of sub-castes
which are endogamous in nature. Every sub-caste forbids its
members to marry persons of other castes. Westermark writes
that, " endogamy is the chief characteristic of caste system"[6].
Intercaste marriage was out of question. If it took place,
the couple might find it very difficult to face the society.
Endogamy is a rule of marriage.

These endogamous groups are generally known as sub-castes.
Each sub-caste manages its own affairs quite independently

of the others, and in the case of the lower castes each has its own seperate Panchayat or Standing Committee, by which all social questions are decided. Further,inter-dining and inter-drinking are restricted to the group which is endogamous.

The sociological significance of this endogamous rule is that on one side close in-breeding has resulted in the perpetuation of weaklings, and on the other side, it has prevented the development of national and emotional integration among the members of different castes.

Among the Jains also, we come across a number of social divisions. We have to see to what extent the general characteristics of castes are found in the Jaina social divisions. We shall see in the next chapter that ideologically Jainism is against the caste divisions based upon the birth. However, in actuality, both sects in Jainism, appear to be sub-divided into a large number of endogamous social groups.

We shall conclude this chapter by pointing out certain factors responsible for changing the caste system as such.

3)   CHANGING PATTERN OF THE CASTE SYSTEM:

Caste, as all the other social institutions,undergoes structural change. We have no definite and convincing proof to point out the nature of caste system during the early centuries of Christian era. But since the advent of Islam,

Hinduism, along with its social organization tended to be a rigid system. Only when Indians came in contact with Western culture that rigidity in caste system was shaken. A number of inter linked factors have proved to be responsible for bringing about major changes in the ancient system of caste. Some of them are briefly dealt with hereunder.

i)   Modern Education:

An important part in weakening the roots of the caste system has been played by Western education. Modern education emphasizes democratic values such as liberty, equality and fraternity. The progress of modern education has proved to be helpful in loosening the ties of caste. Education has encouraged inter-caste marriages. The feelings of superiority and untouchability are being gradually eliminated from the minds of children of all castes who study in the same school.

ii)   Industrialization:

According to A. W. Green, industrialization has also led to   a decrease in the intensity of caste favour because persons from all castes sought and obtained employment in factories. As a result of industrialization, individuals of all castes came into mutual contact into factories, hotels, markets, trains and buses, etc., and the observance of practices concerning touchability became impossible.

iii) Increase in the Importance of Wealth:

In the modern age wealth is replacing caste as the basis of social prestige. Now a days a person adopts that occupation which appears to him to be the most profitable. A wealthy Shudra is more respected than a poor Brahmin. For this reason the ties of the caste are being loosened in the frantic race after wealth.

iv) Equality:

British Government had started to judge persons of all castes, on equal footing and same punishment was laid down for the same offence to all the castes.

v) Importance to Merit:

British Government has given importance to the merit and appointed officers on merit, and not on the basis of caste. Its effect is that high caste people have worked under the guidance of low caste people.

vi) Occupation:

British Government destroyed the monopoly of occupations. Every man can choose his occupation according to his interest and liking.

vii) Means of Communication:

Means of communication have been developed along with the progress of industrialization. This has put an end to

geographical isolation, There is a constant exchange of thoughts, customs etc. People travel together and eat together. This increasing contacts and social interaction is removing inter-caste barriers. In this connection Risley has written in " People of India" that on a platform where the train halts momentarily one does not inquire the caste of the seller when purchasing some thing from him ".[7]

viii) Indian Constitution:

Para 15 (2) of the Constitution of Independent of India declared all citizens as equal. According to the untouchability Crime Act of 1955 it is a crime to prevent anyone from using a public place. Indian Constitution established the equality, faternity and democracy for all the caste.

It is true that during the British Rule and since the Independence, the traditional caste system has changed a lot. Education has, at least in theory, not remained a monopoly of a few. Individuals, irrespective of their caste, can make a choice of occupations. Inter dining has almost become a common thing. Because of the new political system, majority castes have been able to gain political power. The policy of reservation of seats has helped the so called lower caste to gain political prestige. There are also instances of inter-caste marriages. This is one aspect of the change.

There is another aspect also. Because of the same democratic system, caste has assumed importance as far as

representation in power is concerned. It is an open truth
that now a days selection of candidates for Assembly and
Parliament is based on caste and community considerations.
Appeal on the basis of caste proves to be very effective
even among the highly educated people.

There is an increasing tendency among the castes and
sub-castes to form their organizations, and thereby to
maintain solidarity. There are educational, recreational
and other institutions of individual castes and sects which
look after the interests of their own members. This is a
fissiparious tendency and cannot be neglected while studying
the changing pattern of caste system in India.

Thus, traditional social organisation of castes has
changed but the castes have organized themselves on firm
basis for protecting and increasing their sphere of influence.

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