UNIT 5: CASTE IN INDIA

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- Understand the caste system, its meaning and characteristics;
- Identify the difference between caste and varna and caste and class;
- Explain the jajmani system and the dominant caste;
- Discuss the scheduled caste and their problems;

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In India we come across a special type of social stratification in the form of castes. Although evidences of caste are to be found in many parts of the world, but the most perfect instance exists in India. The Hindu society is a caste ridden society and is divided into a number of segments called castes. The status of an individual is determined by his/her birth and not by selection or by accomplishments. No amount of power and prestige can

change the position of a person. In the previous unit we have learned about kinship as a social institution. In this unit we will try to understand one of the fundamental aspects of Indian Society i.e. its Caste System. Here we shall try to learn about meaning and chracteristics of Caste, differences between Caste and Class, concept of Jati, Varna, Jajmani System, Dominant Caste so on and so forth.

5.3 CASTE: MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS

The word 'caste' owes its origin to the Spanish word 'casta' which means breed, race, lineage or a complex of hereditary qualities. The Portuguese applied this term to the classes of people in India known by the name of Jati.

- Risley has defined caste as 'a collection of families or groups bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or 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.'
- According to Lundberg, 'A caste is merely a rigid social class into which members are born and from which they can withdraw or escape only with extreme difficulty.' It is the type of stratification system which is most rigid in matters of mobility and distinctness of status.
- According to Green, 'Caste is a system of stratification in which mobility up and down the status ladder, at least may not occur.'

➢ **Characteristics of Caste System**

From the above definitions it is clear that caste, as a form of social stratification, divides the society into various social groups in a hierarchical order on the basis of ritual purity and pollution. It is a hereditary and endogamous group. It has association with traditional occupations.

Caste system entails a number of characteristics. They are as follows:

❍ **Segmental division:**

So far as caste system is concerned, each caste is an autonomous group independent of the other. Membership in a caste is based on birth. Hence it is unchangeable.For this reason mobility from one caste to another is impossible. Each caste has its own way of life. It has its own rules and

regulations, customs, traditions, practices and rituals. It has its own governing body called the caste council to enforce the caste rules. In this way each caste is a social world by itself.

- **Hierarchy:**

The caste system is hierarchical in nature. It comprises four varnas or castes. These in descending order of ranking are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. There are many castes between the two extremes- the Brahmins and the Shudras. Their social status depends upon their distance from the Brahmins.

The untouchables exist outside the Varna scheme. This five-fold categorization is essentially a religious one, making distinctions on the basis of relative ritual purity. D.C. Bhattacharya rightly observes that "not only do the various castes form a hierarchy but the occupation practised by them, the various items of their diet and the customs they observe all form separate hierarchies."

- **Endogamy:**

Westermark regards endogamy as the essence of the caste system. Endogamy refers to marriage within the caste. The principle of endogamy forbids its members to marry outside the caste. The violation of the rule of endogamy would mean ostracism and loss of caste. Marriage within the Gotra or clan is prohibited. This rule of exogamy is observed strictly in the rural setting. Further, it is worth mentioning in this context that there are a few exceptions to the rule of endogamy in the form of anuloma and pratiloma marriage.

- **Fixed Occupation:**

Caste system is characterized by fixed of occupation. Occupations are hereditary and the members of a caste are expected to follow their traditional occupation without fail. Brahmins are engaged in performing religious ceremonies. Washermen regard it their duty to wash clothes of other caste people. Some occupations like trade, agriculture, military service are, however, regarded as anybody's callings. In some cases the name of caste is dependent upon the very occupation as for instance, Napita (barber), Dhobi, Mochi, Mali etc.

- ***Restriction on Food and Drink:***

There are rules, for example, as regards what sort of food or drink can be accepted by a person from a particular caste. Usually a caste would not accept cooked food from any other caste that stands lower than itself in the social scale. A person belonging to a higher caste believes that he gets polluted even by the shadow of a person belonging to the low caste or by accepting food or drink from him.

- ***Cultural Difference*:**

Since each caste has its own set of rules and regulations with regard to endogamy, pollution-purity, occupational specialization, each caste develops its own subculture since the behaviour of the individual is governed by the requirements of his caste. The doctrine says that it is better for a person to follow the 'dharma' (religious obligation) of his own caste, no matter how low, than the 'dharma' of another caste, no matter how illustrious. The result has been different 'style of life' for different castes. Hence castes are to quote Prof. Gharya, "small and complete social worlds in themselves, marked off definitely from one another, though subsisting within the larger society.

- ***The Concept of Purity and Pollution:***

The concept of pollution plays a crucial part in maintaining the required distance between different castes. "A high caste man may not touch a low caste man, let alone accept cooked food and water from him. Where the two castes involved belong to either extreme of the hierarchy, the lower caste man may be required to keep a minimum distance between himself and the high caste man". The pollution distance varies from caste to caste and from place to place.

- ***A Particular Name:***

Every caste has a particular name through which we can identify it. Sometimes, an occupation is also associated with a particular caste. We can know the profession or occupation of a caste with the help of the name of the caste.

- ***Absence of Vertical Mobility:***

In a caste system, there is no mobility movement of its members, up or down, the social status ladder. A person's status at birth is his life time status.

- **Ascribed Status :**

Caste determines the ascribed status of an individual in a society and before his social interaction fixes the expectation and behaviour which afterwards plays an important part in the growth of the self-concept of an individual, saving him from social adjustment and complications. If an individual is unaware of his caste, he faces serious reaction in social relation or if he adopts behaviour contrary to his caste, even then the society rebels against him by demanding to adopt an expected behaviour.

5.3.1 Jati and Varna

Jati and Varna are two words that are very important while studying Indian social system. These are classifications of the traditional Indian society that confuses many people. Jati and Varna both play an important role in the life of a Hindu. Indian society have a system of classification that was known as Varna vyavastha or system. This Varna system divided the society into 4 classes that were as follows.

- Brahmins who happened to be the priestly class
- Kshatriyas who happened to be the warrior class
- Vaishyas who happened to be the trader class
- Shudras who happened to be the servant or the labour class

- **Varna**

The word Varna, when translated into Hindi, literally translates into color. However, the Varna system had nothing to do with the color of the skin of an individual. In fact, the Varna system was devised to classify a person on the basis of his attributes or characteristics. However, the system got degenerated with the passage of time and developed into the much maligned caste system that is seen even today. This caste system meant that a person had no chances of upward mobility in the society, and he remained in the caste that he was born into.

The original Varna system was devised to have harmony and cooperation between people living in the society and people in different Varnas did not interfere in each other's lives to compete. It was when the Varna of a person was decided on the basis of his birth rather than his qualities that it became rotten.

- **Jati**

The ancient Varna system did not have much of significance in the social order in the society. If one was a Brahmin, it may have meant a lot to other Varnas, but inside his own Varna, he was just another individual with no identity. The need for identity within a single Varna led to the development of Jati system inside the Varna system. Jatis developed much later in India to reflect the trade or profession of a particular community. Dhobi community came from the word dhona which meant to wash, and thus Dhobis were people who washed other people's clothes. Thus, a jati is a community engaged in a particular profession or trade. This system of classification continued in modern India till recently, and a person's surname was enough to let others know all about his profession.

5.3.2 Difference between caste and class

- Castes are found in Indian sub-continent only, especially in India, while classes are found almost everywhere. Classes are especially the characteristic of industrial societies of Europe and America. According to Dumont and Leach, caste is a unique phenomenon found only in India.
- Classes depend mainly on economic differences between groupings of individuals—inequalities in possession and control of material resources—whereas in caste system non-economic factors such as influence of religion (rebirth and rituals of purity-pollution) are most important.
- Unlike castes or other types of strata, classes are not established by legal or religious provisions; membership is not based on inherited position as specified either legally or by custom. On the other hand, the membership is inherited in the caste system.

- Caste system is static whereas the class system is dynamic.
- In the class system, there are no formal restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage between people from different classes as is found in the caste system. Endogamy is the essence of caste system which is perpetuating it.
- Caste is a closed system as mobility is restricted here whereas class is an open system where social mobility is based on individual's achievement rather than birth.
- The feeling of class consciousness is necessary to constitute a class but there is no need for any subjective consciousness in the members of caste.
- The choice of mates in caste system is generally endogamous i.e., marrying within one's own caste. No such restrictions exist in class system.
- The caste system is believed to have been divinely ordained. Classes are secular in origin. They are not founded on religious dogmas.
- The relative prestige of the different castes is well established but in class system there is no rigidly fixed order of prestige.

5.3.3 Jajmani system and Dominant caste

Caste system is a peculiar feature of the Indian society. It is thought that Caste has a stronger hold in the rural areas than the cities. Caste provides rules of social behavior which cannot be violated. Each caste under caste system tries to maintain its hold over its members and controls their behavior. The traditions, customs and rules of behavior differ from caste to caste.Although the different castes are socially segregated, yet there arise several social occasions when one caste has to secure the service of the other castes. Such dependence among the castes have been given the name of 'Jajmani System', under which each group within a village is expected to give certain standardised services to the other castes. As for instance, the primary function of the Brahmin caste is to perform various religious and ceremonial rituals. In return for

his services, the Brahmin gets payment both in cash and in kind. Similarly, the 'Dhobi' or washerman washes the clothes of his 'jajman'. In return for his services he gets a part of the grains. On special occasions like marriage or birth he also gets clothes or utensils.

➢ **Dominant Caste**

This concept given by M.N Srinivas holds that a caste is dominant when it is numerically higher than the other castes.The chief criteria of domination of a caste are:

- Economic strength
- Political power
- Ritual purity
- Numerical strength

According to M.N. Srinivas, "a caste may be said to be dominant when it preponderates numerically over other castes and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low."

➢ **Functions of Dominant Caste:**

- The dominant caste often acts as a reference model to the lower caste group. The lower caste people imitate their behaviour, ritual pattern, customs etc. In this way, they help in cultural transmission.
- The dominant castes of a particular locality act as watch dogs of pluralistic culture and system. They set norms and regulations for social life. They may determine civic and economic privileges.
- Dominant castes are the main power holders. They establish contacts with the outside government officials, elected representatives and political leaders. They influence the political process.
- The Dominant castes set values and norms for the community. Traditionally, its primary functions were Judicial, executive and legitimacy. They form the vital link between the villages and the other world.

- Due to dominant position in rural society, they control the rural economy in various ways and means.

The dominant caste also wields economic and political power over the other caste groups. The dominant caste may not be ritually high but enjoy high status because of wealth, political power and numerical strength. The presence of educated persons and high occupation rate also play an important role in deciding its dominance over other caste groupings. Sometimes a single clan of dominant caste controls a number of villages in areas. The dominant caste settle dispute between persons belonging to their own and other jati. The members of the dominant caste particularly those from the wealthy and powerful families are representative of this village in dealing with the officials

5.3.4 Scheduled castes and their problems

The Scheduled Caste (SC) occupy the bottom most level in the social ladder. They form a major part of the Backward or Depressed classes. They are generally regarded as 'Untouchables and popularly known as 'Harijans'. However, not all SC's are regarded as 'untouchables' in all the places of India. They are economically backward, socially depressed and educationally neglected section of the Indian population.

The British called the so-called 'untouchables' the 'Exterior Castes'. The term 'Untouchable Caste' was made use for the first time by the Simon Commission. Under the Government of India Act of 1935 the untouchables were designated as 'Scheduled Castes'. The Constitution of India has also referred to them as the 'Scheduled Castes'. But Mahatma Gandhi addressed them as 'Harijans'-the people of God.

- **Definition:**
  - According to D.N.Majumdar the term 'Scheduled Castes' refers to the 'Untouchable Castes'. The Untouchable Castes are those who suffer from various social and political disabilities many of which are traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by higher castes.

- The Scheduled Castes can be defined as those economically, socially, educationally and politically backward castes which are kept at a distance by the other castes as 'untouchables'.

➢ **Problems of the Scheduled Castes:**

The scheduled castes have been suffering from various social, religious, legal, economic, educational and other disabilities. Their problems can be understood under the following three sections:

- **Problem of Untouchablity:** The SCs had to perform unclean occupations such as carrying night soil and dead animals, cleaning urinals and cattle shed, washing clothes and performing certain duties at places of cremation. These occupations were treated as polluted or impure. So, people performing these occupations were treated as untouchables.
- **No physical contact:** The SCs had to maintain a distance from the higher caste people.
- **Ban on the use of common wells and tanks:** The members belonging to the lower strata were not allowed to use common village wells and tanks for fetching water.
- **Prohibited from entering temple:** The Scheduled caste persons were not allowed to enter the temple for offering worship.
- **Non acceptance of cooked food:** The food cooked by this section was not accepted by the higher castes.
- **Dependence proneness:** They were dependent on others for livelihood and survival.
- **Problem of poverty:** The SCs were deprived of their economic rights. So they remained poor and dependent upon others. The problems associated with the poverty of Scheduled castes are as follows:
- **Material deprivation:** The SC's were not allowed to have any material possessions.
- **Landlessness:** They did not own any land for the purpose of residence and agriculture.

- **Educational Backwardness:** Due to deprivation and poor socio-economic condition, the Scheduled Castes did not attend school and remained backward educationally.
- **Employment and Government services:** After independence, some of them have been employed in government jobs like sweepers, watchman, peons etc. Now, some of them have received higher education and are well placed. But majority of them survive as agricultural labourers, where they are exploited in the payment of wages.
- **Indebtedness and Bonded labour:** Due to their economic deprivation and poor economic conditions, the SC's have to take loans for their survival. They become indebted for their inability to repay the capital with interest and end up becoming bonded labourers.
- **Selection of occupation limited:** The caste system imposes restrictions on the occupational choice of the members. The occupational choice was very much limited for the Harijans.
- **Political Disabilities:** The untouchables hardly participate in the political matters. They were not given any place in the politics, administration and the general governance of India. They were not allowed to hold any public post. Political representations were denied to them. Even though they were given voting rights, it will still take a long way to become an organized force.

➢ **Measures for the welfare of the scheduled castes**

The Government of India has been trying to uplift the SCs right form its very inception. The Government attempts to promote the welfare of the SCs through different constitutional and legislative measures.

- The Preamble of the Constitution of India declares that it assures equality, promotes fraternity, guarantees liberty and ensures justice to one and all.
- Article 15, 16, 17, 38 and 46 guarantee that the state shall not discriminate between persons on account of their religion and caste or class.

- Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, race,sex or palce of birth.
- Article 17 abolishes untouchability and is a punishable offence in accordance with law.
- Article 46 promotes educational and economic interests of Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other weaker sections.
- Article 330 reserves representation for SC's and ST's in the House of the People.
- Article 335 mentions the claims of SCs and STs to services and posts.
- Article 338 empowers the Central Government to appoint a National Commission for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.
- Article 339 empowers the President to appoint a commission to report on the administration of the Scheduled areas and the welfare of the scheduled tribes on the states.
- Article 341 empowers the President to specify the castes, races or tribes deemed as Scheduled Castes in a particular State or Union Territory.

5.3.5 Abolition of Untouchability

Article17 of the Constitution of India declares abolition of untouchability. Untouchability Offence Act 1955 was promulgated declaring untouchability as an offence. This Act has banned the practice of untouchability in the matters of employment, drinking water supply, offering worships, journey by bus or train, admission in hospitals etc. The Act has made the practice of untouchability punishable in the form of fine and punishment. The Untouchability(offences) Amendment and Miscellaneous Act 1976, has enhanced the punishment for those who practices untouchability. But in spite of all such prohibitive measures, untouchability is still being practiced. In rural areas, it is still a social reality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Define caste.

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Q2: Why is caste endogamous in nature?

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Q3: How is status determined within the caste system?

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Q4: What do you understand by Dominant Caste?

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Q5: Why does the SC's need special attention from the Government?

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5.4 LET US SUM UP

- Caste is a special form of social stratification found in India.
- Caste is characterized by its segmental division, hierarchy, endogamy, fixity on occupation, cultural difference, concept of purity and pollution, ascribed status and absence of vertical mobility.
- Caste is religious in nature while class is economic.
- The dependence among the castes have been given the name of 'Jajmani System', under which each group within a village is expected to give certain standardised services to the other castes.
- The concept of dominant caste given by M.N. Srinivas is that caste which is not only numerically higher but also has a greater political and economic hold over other castes.

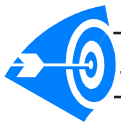
- The scheduled castes which occupy lowest level in the social hierarchy are economically backward, socially depressed and educationally neglected section of the Indian population.
- Because of their backwardness, several legislative measures have been taken up by the central and state government for the upliftment of this section.
- Untouchability which was associated with the Scheduled castes for a long time is now a punishable offence under Article 17 of the Indian constitution.



5.5 FURTHER READING

1) Sharma K.L.(1986): Essays in Social Stratification, Jaipur, Rawat Publications.

2) Tumin, M.M. (1994): Social Stratification: The Forms and Functions of Inequality, New Delhi: PHI.



5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: Risley has defined caste as 'a collection of families or groups bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or 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.'

Ans to Q No. 2: A person born in a caste remains in it for life and dies in it. Every caste is sub-divided into sub-castes, every one of which forbids its members to marry persons outside it. Thus, it is endogamous in nature.

Ans to Q No. 3: Status is ascribed in the caste system, where a person inherits its caste and the status attached with it at the time of birth itself. Status is determined by birth.