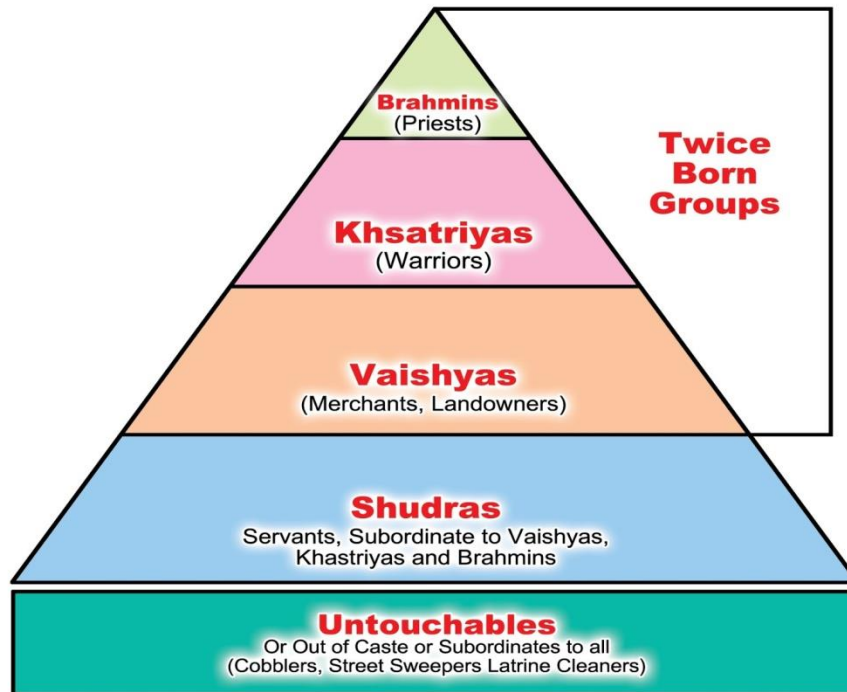# Module-5

CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Caste system is a phenomenon related to Hinduism in particular. Its origin, evolution and existence are peculiar to India. Caste system is a system much like western concept of racism where people are discriminated against due to their skin colour; similarly, in caste system, discrimination is done on the basis of birth i.e. a person's social status is defined on the basis of his/her caste in which he/she took birth and that is the sole criterion of establishing his/her social status. In other words, on the basis of caste, it is fixed at the time of a person's birth that whether she/he would have higher or lower status in social hierarchy.

It's a big shame that even in a 21st century and in this age and time when human society has so progressed scientifically that people are planning to buy lands on planet Mars, Indian society believes in a system as archaic as the caste system. There have been various social movements and notable social reformers who have all through their lives worked to abolish this discriminatory system solely based on birth. However, not much has happened on the ground. Indian Constitution also provides several provisions to secure rights of socially backward persons and there are laws too in this regard but there is lot to be done still.

DEFINITION OF CASTE

Caste or Varna System is a purely Indian phenomenon and especially it is practiced among Hindus, though with time, as far as India is considered, other religions such as Islam, Sikhism, Christianity etc. also adopted some trappings of it. As already been explained it is much like the western concept of racism, it can also be compared with the Class System of European continent. Class system is also a discriminatory system. Class system is based on many different factors such as wealth, power, prestige, ancestry or birth, religion, and occupation. Generally, class is not hereditary while caste is. But similar to the caste system, class system also differentiates or stratifies different social groups on the basis of their standing in the society.

Caste system is a unique type of class system in which the social ordering is done on the basis of birth. This type of system exists in Indian subcontinent only. Unlike class system, cast system does not allow any person to move from one caste to another. There is strict restriction on inter-dining and inter-marriage among people belonging to different castes. One of the main characteristics of caste system is Endogamy i.e. marrying into their own caste. It is very formal, rigid and well defined system.

ORIGIN OF CASTE SYSTEM

There are many theories like traditional, racial, political, occupational, evolutionary etc which try to explain the caste system in India.

1.Traditional Theory

According to this theory, the caste system is of divine origin. It says caste system is an extension of the varna system, where the 4 varnas originated from the body of Bramha. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and came from Brahma's head. Kshatriyas, or the warriors and rulers, came from his arms. Vaishyas, or the traders, were created from his thighs. At the bottom were the Shudras, who came from Brahma's feet. The mouth signifies its use for preaching, learning etc, the arms – protections, thighs – to cultivate or business, feet – helps the whole body, so the duty of the Shudras is to serve all the others. The sub castes emerged later due to inter marriages between the 4 varnas. The proponents of this theory cite Purushasukta of Rigveda, Manusmriti etc to support their stand

2. Racial Theory

The Sanskrit word for caste is varna which means colour. The caste stratification of the Indian society had its origin in the chaturvarna system – Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Indian sociologist D.N. Majumdar writes in his book, "*Races and Culture in India*", the caste system took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India.
Rig Vedic literature stresses very significantly the differences between the Arya and non-Aryans (Dasa), not only in their complexion but also in their speech, religious practices, and physical features. The Varna system prevalent during the Vedic period was mainly based on division of labour and occupation. The three classes, Brahma, Kshatra and Vis are frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda. Brahma and Kshatra represented the poet-priest and the warrior-chief. Vis comprised all the common people. The name of the fourth class, the 'Sudra', occurs only once in the Rig Veda. The Sudra class represented domestic servants.

3. Political Theory

According to this theory, caste system is a clever device invented by the Brahmins in order to place themselves on the highest ladder of social hierarchy. Dr. Ghurye states, "Caste is a Brahminic child of Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and then transferred to other parts of India." The Brahmins even added the concept of spiritual merit of the king, through the priest or purohit in order to get the support of the ruler of the land.

4. Occupational Theory

Caste hierarchy is according to occupation. Those professions which were regarded as better and respectable made the persons who performed them superior to those who were engaged in dirty professions. According to Newfield, "Function and function alone is responsible for the origin of caste structure in India." With functional differentiation there came in occupational differentiation and numerous sub-castes such as Lohar(blacksmith), Chamar(tanner), Teli(oil-pressers).

5. Evolution Theory

According to this theory, the caste system did not come into existence all of a sudden or at a particular date. It is the result of a long process of social evolution.

- Hereditary occupations;
- The desire of the Brahmins to keep themselves pure;
- The lack of rigid unitary control of the state;
- The unwillingness of rulers to enforce a uniform standard of law and custom
- The 'Karma' and 'Dharma' doctrines also explain the origin of caste system. Whereas the Karma doctrine holds the view that a man is born in a particular caste because of the result of his action in the previous incarnation, the doctrine of Dharma explains that a man who accepts the caste system and the principles of the caste to which he belongs, is living according to Dharma. Confirmation to one's own dharma also remits on one's birth in the rich high caste and violation gives a birth in a lower and poor caste.
- Ideas of exclusive family, ancestor worship, and the sacramental meal;
- Clash of antagonistic cultures particularly of the patriarchal and the matriarchal systems;
- Clash of races, colour prejudices and conquest;
- Deliberate economic and administrative policies followed by various conquerors
- Geographical isolation of the Indian peninsula;
- Foreign invasions;
- Rural social structure.

FEATURES OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

1. **Segmental Division of Society:** The society is divided into various small social groups called castes. Each of these castes is a well developed social group, the membership of which is determined by the consideration of birth.

2. **Hierarchy:** According to Louis Dumont , castes teach us a fundamental social principle of hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy is the Brahmin caste and at the bottom is the untouchable caste. In between are the intermediate castes, the relative positions of which are not always clear.

3. **Endogamy:** Endogamy is the chief characteristic of caste, i.e. the members of a caste or sub-caste should marry within their own caste or sub-caste. The violation of the rule of endogamy would mean ostracism and loss of caste. However, hypergamy (practice of women marrying someone who is wealthier or of higher caste or social status.) and hypogamy (marriage with a person of lower social status) were also prevalent. Gotra exogamy is also maintained in each caste. Every caste is subdivided into different small units on the basis of gotra. The members of one gotra are believed to be successors of a common ancestor-hence prohibition of marriage within the same gotra.

4. **Hereditary status and occupation:** Megasthenes, the Greek traveler to India in 300 B. C., mentions hereditary occupation as one of the two features of caste system, the other being endogamy.

5. **Restriction on Food and Drink:** Usually a caste would not accept cooked food from any other caste that stands lower than itself in the social scale, due to the notion of getting polluted. There were also various associated taboos related to food. The cooking taboo, which defines the persons who may cook the food. The eating taboo which may lay down the ritual to be followed at meals. The commensal taboo which is concerned with the person with whom one may take food. Finally, the taboo which has to do with the nature of the vessel (whether made of earth, copper or brass) that one may use for drinking or cooking. For eg: In North India Brahmin would accept pakka food (cooked in ghee) only from some castes lower than his own. However, no individual would accept kachcha(cooked in water) food prepared by an inferior caste. Food prepared by Brahmin is acceptable to all, the reason for which domination of Brahmins in hotel industry for long time. Beef was not allowed by any castes, except harijans.

6. **A Particular Name:** Every caste has a particular name though which we can identify it. Sometimes, an occupation is also associated with a particular caste.

7. **The Concept of Purity and Pollution:** The higher castes claimed to have ritual, spiritual and racial purity which they maintained by keeping the lower castes away through the notion of pollution. The idea of pollution means a touch of lower caste man would pollute or defile a man of higher caste. Even his shadow is considered enough to pollute a higher caste man.

8. **Jati Panchayat:** The status of each caste is carefully protected, not only by caste laws but also by the conventions. These are openly enforced by the community through a governing

body or board called Jati Panchayat. These Panchayats in different regions and castes are named in a particular fashion such as Kuldriya in Madhya Pradesh and Jokhila in South Rajasthan.

CONCEPT OF DOMINANT CASTE

The concept of 'dominant caste' was propounded by M.N. Srinivas. It was for the first time appeared in his essay on the social system of a Mysore village. While constructing the concept, perhaps Srinivas was unconsciously influenced by African studies on the dominant clan and dominant lineage. Srinivas developed the concept in his study of Rampura village which is a little away from Mysore city in Karnataka state. Srinivas, in fact, wanted to give a comprehensive study of Rampura.

To write down the details of the village he had gone to Stanford for writing down a monograph on Rampura. But there "by a strange quirk of fate all the three copies of my fieldwork notes, processed over a period of eighteen years" were destroyed when a fire took place in his Stanford office. Everything was destroyed for Srinivas. Whatever he remembered about Rampura, later on came in the form of The Re-membered Village (1976). The definition of 'dominant caste' has undergone some change over a period of time.

The traditional forms of dominance have not entirely disappeared and neither has dominance shifted fully to the numerically strongest caste, there is no doubt, however, that there is a shift and this traditional phase is marked by inter-group tensions. But what is significant from our point of view is that in many parts of India there are castes which are decisively dominant.

It was in 1962 that M.N. Srinivas specified the following three characteristics of a dominant caste:

1. A caste dominates when it wields economic and political power.

2. It has a high rank in caste hierarchy.

3. Numerical strength.

The earlier definition of dominant caste was reviewed by writers of several village studies. Srinivas also looked into the field and the comments made by the others.

In 1966, he reviewed his earlier definition which runs below:

For a caste to be dominant, it should own a sizable amount of the arable land locally available, have strength of numbers, and occupy a high place in the local hierarchy. When a caste has all the attributes of dominance, it may be said to enjoy a decisive dominance.

Characteristics:

On the basis of the definitions of dominant caste given by Srinivas and the comments offered by other sociologists, a construct could be made which includes the ideal type of dominant caste.

1. Economic and political power:

The power of a particular caste lies in the owning of land. The caste which has larger portion of the land in the village wields greater

power. First, his agricultural income increases. The size of the land is also related to irrigation.

In case of larger landowning and adequate irrigation facilities, naturally the wields of the casteman increase. Second, the larger landowning caste also provides jobs to the landless farmers and marginal farmers. Such a situation renders the super-ordinated landless labourers as the 'servants' of the large landowning caste. These castes also apply modern techniques of agriculture such as chemical manure, improved implements and new patterns of crop-ping.

2. *High rank in caste hierarchy:*
Normally, the caste which is traditionally higher in the caste hierarchy enjoys the status of dominance. The Brahmins and the Rajputs have traditionally been dominant in the villages. The Brahmins have at the top of the caste hierarchy and they officiate at the religious festivals and rituals of the village.

The Rajputs have been the feudal thakurs in the village. They have traditionally occupied larger portions of the village land. The economic and political power, thus, in the village has given the dominant status to the Brahmins and Rajputs.

Recently, the criterion, namely, economic and political power, has undergone a change. The reservations made for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women have given a new attribute to the concept of dominant caste.

3. Numerical strength:

Before the advent of modernisation and development, numerical strength did not have any strength of the dominance of a caste. Recently, numerical strength of a caste, assumes importance because of the vote bank created by adult suffrage. The castes which have larger number of voters, naturally, determine the fate of a candidate contesting elections. What is called these days as caste-war is actually the importance of a caste to determine the fate of a candidate.

4. A sizeable amount of the arable land:

Normally, in India's villages, smaller number of big landowners occupy larger portion of land. In other words, the caste which has larger portion of village land wields power. The big landowners, thus, are patrons of the bulk of the poor villagers. In villages, those castes which have larger portion of land enjoy power and prestige. Srinivas says that landownership is a crucial factor in establishing dominance. He observes:

Landownership confers not only power but prestige, so much so that, individuals who have made good in any walk of life tend to invest in land. If landownership is not always an indispensable passport to high rank, it certainly facilitates upward mobility.

CHANGING NATURE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

It is indisputable that the caste system has been changing. Change has always been present, though its rate in the different aspects of the system has not been uniform.

Changes in the caste system entail three types of changes such as structural change, functional change and attitudinal change.

Structural Changes:
(i) Decline in the supremacy of the Brahmins:

There has been a sharp decline in the supremacy of the Brahmins in society. In the past, the Brahmin occupied the topmost position in the caste hierarchy. But today consequent upon the process of modernization the dominance of the Brahmins has been relegated to the background. He does not enjoy the same social status, which he once used to.

(ii) Changes in the Caste hierarchy:

The caste system is no longer a clearly demarcated system of hierarchically-ordered caste groups. As a result of certain factors such as occupational diversification, migration to urban areas, mechanisation of agriculture, boundaries between caste groups are tending to blur or break down. There is an increasing degree of interpenetration between different groups, classes and categories. A gradual lessening of the congruence between caste, class and power is visible.

(iii) Protection of the Harijans:

The governmental policy of protective discrimination has gone a long way in improving the socio -economic conditions of the Harijans. Consequently, their social status has improved to a considerable extent.

Functional Changes:
(i) Change in the fixation of status:

In a caste society, birth was taken as the exclusive basis of social status. But in the changing social scenario, birth no longer constitutes the basis of social prestige. Criteria such as wealth, ability, education, efficiency etc. have become the determinants of social status. The significance of caste as an ascriber of status has been relegated to the background.

(ii) Change with regard to occupation:

So far as caste system is concerned, the individual had no choice but to follow the occupation ascribed to him by his caste. But today occupation is not the hereditary monopoly of any caste any more. One is free to take up any occupation he likes according to his ability and interest. Mahatma Gandhi's movement preaching dignity of labour has drawn higher castes to dirty-hand callings while education has opened white- collar occupations for members of lower castes.

(iii) Changes in marriage restrictions:

Under the caste system endogamy was the basis of mate-selection. The members of a caste or sub-caste were forbidden by an inexorable

social law to marry outside the group. But at present the Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 have removed endogamic restrictions and declared inter-caste marriages as legally valid.

Of late, several factors such as impact of western philosophy, co-education, working together of males and females of different castes in the same factory or office have contributed to an increase in the cases of inter-caste marriage, love-marriage and late-marriage.

iv) Change in commensality:

In the traditional system, the unit of commensality was defined fairly rigidly in terms of caste affiliation. In recent times, there has been a gradual expansion of this unit. Today, Brahmins are inter dining with 'clean' Shudras. They do not hesitate to take kachha food from other clean castes. Furthermore, they do not hesitate to accept food and water from the members of the lower castes for fulfillment of their political ends.

(v) Change in the concept of purity and pollution:

Kapadia stated that the Hindu concept of purity and pollution was very extensive in its scope and mandatory in its observance till the twenties of this century. Under the caste system occupations were ranked in accordance with their ritual purity. For example, a person coming into contact with a barber was supposed to become impure. Meat, fish, wine etc. were regarded as ritually impure.

A menstruating lady was considered impure and as such the food cooked by her was considered impure. In the twenty first century the

importance of these ideas of purity and pollution in Hindu social life has considerably decreased.

Religious sanction no more constitutes the basis of pure and impure. The rules of hygiene have formed the criterion of pure and impure at present.

(vi) Change in the life style:

In the past, every caste had its own life style. It was the differences in the styles of life that made the people of different castes appear distinct from one another. But today differences between the life styles of castes are gradually being eliminated and there is a marked tendency towards the evolution of a common style. The standardization of life styles is due to the twin processes of sanskritization and westernization.

(vii) Change in inter-caste relations:

Of late, the pattern of inter-caste relations has undergone profound changes. The mutual rights and obligations characterising inter-caste relations have crumbled down. Members of the low castes no longer obey the orders of the members of high castes. They do not come forward to perform forced labour for the members of the upper caste.

Further, efforts made by the lower castes to rise in the social ladder have annoyed the upper castes. All these factors have led to inter-caste conflicts. Such inter-caste conflicts are gradually increasing. However, these are more for achieving power than on grounds of ritual status.

(viii) Change in the power of caste Panchayats:

So far as caste system was concerned, each caste had a caste Panchayat. The caste Panchayat played the role of a judicial body. But today Jati Panchayats are on the decline. Law courts and village factions have taken over most of their roles.

(ix) Restrictions on education removed:

Today education is no more confined to the higher castes. Anybody belonging to any caste can prosecute study in educational institutions. Of late, the Government both at the Union and State levels has adopted several measures for the spread of education among the lower castes by way of giving them stipends, scholarships, free study materials, reservation of seats etc.

(x) Changes in the system of power:

The notions of democracy and adult franchise have affected the caste system in several ways. The new political system attacks the very roots of hierarchization. In the past politics was regarded as the sole preserve of the higher castes. But today people belonging to all castes are becoming conscious that they can play an important role in the political processes and can be benefitted from them.

(xi) Growth of caste consciousness:

Casteism has increased. It has affected political issues and political decisions.

(xii) Weakening of the Jajmani system:

The Jajmani system in the villages has weakened, affecting inter-caste relations. Several reasons like laxity in the performance of rites and

rituals on the part of the members of various castes, decline of Brahminical supremacy, development in the field of transport and communication, intergenerational educational mobility etc. may be attributed to the decline of Jajmani system in rural India.