UNIT - 4

CASTE SYSTEM

Caste system is defined as the ascriptive system of stratification which is unique to Indian society. It is both a cultural and structural phenomenon.

Culturally, it is a system of value, beliefs and practices associated with a particular strata. G S Ghurye, M N Srinivas have understood it in cultural terms.

Structurally, it refers to a specific pattern of inter-related structures along with interaction among the various castes on the basis of various disabilities and restriction. For instance, the association between caste and work. Lower caste people are overrepresented in menial labour. Andre Beteille, Dipankar Gupta subscribe to this perspective.

Perspectives on the study of caste system

G S Ghurye

Ghurye studied caste system from a historical, comparative and integrative perspective. He adopted an attributional approach towards caste system where he discussed significant features of the caste system and what distinguishes it from other forms of social stratification

Attributes of caste

Segmental division of society- The segmental division of society refers to its division or compartmentalization into a number of segments or castes, each of which has a life of its own. Each caste provides a center of its own regarding rules, regulations, standards of morality and justice. Ghurye sees castes as social groupings or segments the membership of which is acquired and fixed by birth.

Hierarchy- It refers to the arrangement of the many segments of society in terms of higher or superior and lower or inferior positions in relation to each other. The relative ranking of particular caste groups differed from one place to another but, everywhere, the Brahmins were placed at the top and the untouchables were kept at the bottom of the hierarchy

Purity and Pollution-The principles of purity and pollution find their expression in the codes regulating the acceptance of food or drink from other castes. For example, 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 was seen for a long time.

Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections- The speech, dress and custom of the high castes could not be endorsed or emulated by the lower castes as by doing so they would go against the governing rule of the society. The lower castes were being made to live outside the main village boundary and denied the access to village wells and temples. Similarly, even the mere presence of person of low caste or his/her shadow was regarded as polluting

It is recorded that under the rule of the Marathas and the Peshwas, the Mahars and Mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona after 3 PM and before 9 AM because their bodies cast too long a shadow in such hours, which falling on a member of the higher castes especially Brahmin defiles them

Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation- Every caste or a group of allied castes was associated with a hereditary occupation. Since distinction was made between clean and unclean and therefore, between pure and impure occupations, the hereditary occupation of a caste reflected its status in society. For example, the Brahmins were engaged in priesthood, while the lower castes took up occupations such as those of barber, washerman and cobbler.

Restrictions on marriage-In order to maintain the boundary of caste groups, inter-caste marriages were prohibited. Hence, caste groups practiced endogamy. Every caste was segmented into smaller subdivisions or sub-castes and these were the units of endogamy.

He has also analyzed the changing pattern of caste system and has opined that it will diminish with rise of modern education, but at the same time also admits that as caste based social and political organizations are developing, it is difficult to eliminate it. He depicted caste as integrative force in society in past, but also acknowledges its disharmonious present role. He proposes a revival of culture to infuse spirit of fraternity to get rid of current evils from caste system

According to Ghurye, whole Indian society is caste based and even tribes are also part of this system as opposed to Western notion that tribes and castes are two different concepts. He considered tribes as 'Backward Hindus'

Limitations of Ghurye's analysis of caste

- Critics accuse him of relying too much on text and not going for empirical studies
- Andre Beteille claims that Ghurye's understanding of caste is confusing as he continuously changes his goal post from Indological to diffusionism to comparative to outright nationalism
- Ghurye is also accused of taking a Hindu centric view of society which is apparent his calling of tribes as 'backward Hindus'

M N Srinivas

Srinivas also adopted the attributional approach towards caste system but emphasized on the study of the structure of relations arising between castes.

Attributes of caste system

Hierarchy- For Srinivas, hierarchy is the core or the essence of the caste system. It refers to the arrangement of hereditary groups in a rank order. According to him, there exists two hierarchies-

- Ritual hierarchy is manifested in dressing, rules of segregation, rules of eating etc.
- Secular hierarchy is manifested in power, wealth, education etc.

Srinivas considers that the social ranks in the caste system can be changed through the process of Sanskritization.

Occupational Differentiation- Srinivas finds a close relationship between a caste and its occupation. He says that caste is nothing more than the systematization of occupational differentiation. Castes are known by their occupations and many derive their name from the occupation followed, e.g., Lohar, Sonar, Kumhar, Teli, Chamar etc. He also stresses that occupation are placed in a hierarchy of high and low.

Restrictions on commensality, dress speech and custom- There is a dietic hierarchy and restrictions on acceptance of food.

Pollution- The distance between castes is maintained by the principles of pollution.

Caste Panchayats and Assemblies- Besides the above mentioned attributes of a caste, every caste is subject to the control of an order maintaining body or a Panchayat. Elders of each caste in a village together maintain the social order by exercising their authority collectively. Further, every caste member is answerable to the authority of its caste assembly. The authority of a caste assembly may extend beyond village boundaries to include in its jurisdiction caste members in other villages.

Caste vs Varna

Srinivas states that there are four varnas and thousands of caste groups in India. Varna is always textual, caste is contextual. Varna is ideal, book view and tells what India was. Caste is real, field view and tells what India is.

According to Srinivas, 'Varna is a macro theoretical schema, whereas caste or Jati is an all India phenomenon defining reality'.

Caste as a dynamic system of stratification

Srinivas claims that caste system is not fixed, and caste positions and caste relations are dynamic. He gave the concept of Sanskritization where attempts to change one's rank is done by giving up attributes that define a caste as low and adopting attributes that are indicative of higher status. Sanskritization helps improve the ritual hierarchy of a caste

Features of Sanskritization

- Those castes which enjoyed political and economic power but were not rated high in ritual ranking were eligible to go through the process of sanskritisation.
- Includes economic betterment, acquisition of political power, modern western education, and local leadership.
- Sanskritization is a two-way process. We find Brahmins worshipping local deities who preside over epidemics, cattle, children's lives, and crops, besides the great gods of all India Hinduism.
- Unit of mobility is group and not an individual or family.
- It emphasizes on vertical mobility and not on the horizontal mobility.

Dominant Caste

In his study of the village of Rampur, Srinivas gave the concept of Dominant Caste. Rampur had a number of castes including Brahmins, peasants and untouchables. The peasants were ritually ranked below the Brahmins, but they own lands and numerically preponderant and have political influence over village affairs. Consequently, despite their low ritual rank, the peasants were the dominant caste in the village.

He gave 6 attributes of the dominant caste-

- sizeable amount of arable land
- strength of numbers
- high place in the local hierarchy
- western education
- jobs in the administration
- urban sources of income

Out of the above attributes of the dominant caste, the following three are important ie numerical strength, economic power through ownership of land, and political power

Factors like land reforms, Panchayati Raj institutions, reservation in employment and education, green revolution has benifitted some castes and improved their economic and political power. This led them to become dominant castes if they have numerical strength.

Reddy, Kamma, Lingayat, Vokkaliga, Patidar, Rajput, Maratha, Yadav, Jat, Gujjar are some examples of dominant caste

Criticism of M N Srinivas

- The concept of sanskritisation and dominant caste put him closer to Hindutva ideology of cultural nationalism.
- He is accused of marginalizing and alienating religious minorities.
- His ethnographic work merely mirrors his ideological bias ie elitism or Brahminical Domination
- Scholars argue that Sanskritization is not a new concept and just a cosmetic makeover of universal process of reference groups.

Louis Dumont

He considers caste as a token of the cultural unity and distinctiveness in India. Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* offers several new perspectives on caste system in India. The chief elements of his methodology are-

Ideology- He defines ideology as unified set of ideas and values. He considers the ideology of Indian civilization as binary opposite to the West ie traditional against modern, holism against individualism, hierarchy against equality, status against power etc

Dialectic relationship and comparison- The dialectics of caste system can be decoded through the concept of purity and pollution. Hierarchy suggests the relationship of 'emcompassing' and 'being encompassed'. The upper caste which is considered as pure are encompassing the lower or impure castes

Indological and Structuralist approach- Dumont advocated the confluence of Indological approach and structuralist approach to study the caste system and village social structure in India. The evolution and growth of social institutions can be traced through classical texts which can be compared with the ethnographic studies

Cognitive Historical Approach- His study of social change focus on how the cognitive system of Indian tradition reacts to the cognitive elements of western culture such as individualism, freedom, democracy etc. The reaction could be of acceptance or rejection

Attributional Approach

Hierarchy as the principle

In his book Homo Hierarchicus, Dumont claims that Hierarchy as the principle distinguish Indian society from modern society. He asserts hierarchy as a universal principle and claims that if it is not formally recognized in a society, it takes pathological form such as racism

- He considers that traditions are stark opposite of modernity. Traditional or simpler societies are characterized by hierarchy and collective goals while modern societies preach equality and individualism
- He considers ritual hierarchy as the central facet of the caste system which is independent of economic and political power. He advocates this by giving the example of the subordination of the king to the priests in Hindu society
- Caste occurs only in India and there is no cross-cultural comparison of caste system
- He explains caste as a set of relationships of economic, political and kinship systems, sustained by certain values which are mostly religious in nature
- Building on **Bougle's** definition of caste which emphasizes on hierarchical ranks, restrictions on commensality and marriage, division of labour, Dumont highlights the underlying principle of pure and impure

Concept of Purity and Pollution

Brahmins assigned with the priestly functions, occupied top rank in social hierarchy and are considered pure. Untouchables are specialized in 'impure' tasks which makes them polluted.

He highlights temporary and permanent impurity. Temporary impurity happens under the events of death, birth, menstruation and last for a prescribed time period. Permanent impurity is associated with the lower castes

Substantialization of Caste

Dumont discusses the significant changes in the caste system. He recognizes the relation of traditional interdependence of castes has been replaced by inter-caste competitiveness. He calls this the substantialization of Caste. The factors responsible for substantialization of Caste system are-judicial and political changes, socio-religious reforms, westernization, growth of modern professions, urbanization, spatial mobility and growth of market economy

Despite the changes, caste in temporary form is a combination of traditional and modern features

Criticism of Louis Dumont

- He relies heavily on classical Sanskritic texts, making his study limited and biased
- Berreman criticizes Dumont's separation of status and power. Caste positions are witnessed to be changed with the advent of political and economic power
- He highlighted the integrative role of caste system while ignoring the conflicts in the form of protest movements
- Andre Beteille says his views are much on what caste ought to be and not what caste today is. Dumont considered caste system as closed with no scope of social mobility
- Dipankar Gupta's study of Jats in North India indicates that Jat consider Brahmins as idle, lazy and greedy contrary to Dumont's understanding of Brahmins as pure, sacred and high placed

Andre Beteille

Beteille conducted his study on 'Caste, class and power' at Tanjore village (Sripuram). He highlighted the interaction between the three forces. While Ghurye and Dumont focused only on ideological/ritual aspect of caste , Beteille casts his net wider to understand Indian society and adopts a trinitarian approach of Weber

Caste

Caste may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system

Caste system is a continuous process which enjoys both legal and religious sanctions. Legal in the sense, caste system used to decide the punishment for the offender

He studied the caste system of Sripuram and identified three main segments namely, Brahmins, non- Brahmins and Adi-Dravids (Untocuhables)

He attacked the existing model of caste system which was based on ideas rather than actual behavior and considered caste relations as non-antagonisitc. He also claims that the model doesn't take into consideration the economic and political interests of the groups

Class- Classes are defined in terms of ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. Hence, they are open and doesn't enjoy legal and religious sanctions

Beteille identified various classes in Sripuram ie sharecroppers, farmers, cultivators etc. He found that land has begun passing out of Brahmin's hands and tenants now have stronger rights

Power-Distribution of power in villages create hierarchy. This hierarchy is found to be different from the hierarchy generated from caste and class. In some cases, the traditional relationship of caste and power has been reversed. Panchayats are found to be dominated by non-Brahmins

Ownership of land is no longer a decisive factor in acquiring power. Numerical support and strategic position in the party machinery plays an important role. Panchayati Raj and Adult franchise has made power a pervasive phenomenon

The interplay of caste, class and power forms the stratification of Indian society where caste forms one aspect of stratification system

Andre Beteille's idea of caste

- Caste is stratified rather than hierarchical system and within them divisions and subdivisions exist - poor Brahmin, rich Brahmin
- He highlights the paradoxical weakening and strengthening of the caste system post independence. Caste is diluted by the process of secularization, equality before law, eduation etc however, electoral politics and media is keeping caste alive
- Caste system is dynamic and has scope for social mobility specially in the secular sphere

Criticism of Andre Beteille

- He is often criticized for being obsessed with only understanding the dynamism of caste
- He is accused of narrow empiricism for generalization from the study of a single village of Southern India

Nexus between caste and politics

Rajni Kothari examined the 'relationship between caste and politics. He found that three factors—education, government patronage, and slowly expanding franchise (including 18–21-year-old young persons in the electorate)—have penetrated the caste system because of which it has come to affect democratic politics in the country

- Caste is used in political mobilization, in garnering votes and even for selection of candidates as per the caste of voters in a particular region.
- For those castes which are at the bottom of the hierarchy, voting right serves as a powerful activity. The lower the social and economic status of a caste, the higher the importance of the vote.
- Political parties mobilise caste support. India has witnessed the emergence of political parties based on caste. For instance, Bahujan Samaj Party
- Caste is becoming more and more strengthened because these castes are forming caste association which act as a pressure group.

Caste in contemporary times

The caste system is often considered to being diluted in the present times because of the following reasons-

- **Ghurye** holds that changes in the rigidities of the caste system were due to the growth of city life. Industrial growth and urbanization provided new sources of livelihood to people and made occupational mobility possible.
- With new transportation facilities, there was frequent communication. People of all castes travelled together.
- **Kingsley Davis** held that the anonymity, congestion, mobility, secularism and changeability of the city makes the operation of the caste virtually impossible.
- The socio-religious reforms movements, merger of some states, spread of modern education, spatial mobility and the, spread of market economy accelerated the process of modernisation and development.
- Culture process of social change like little tradition- great tradition, sanskritization challenged the caste taboos such as inter-dining, pollution etc

However, despite of this, caste still remains an important dimension of modern social life

- Caste System imposes certain restrictions on the institution of marriage. Honor killing and stigma against inter-caste marriages highlight the same
- The nexus between politics and caste system keeps the caste system alive
- Caste may be diluted in public sphere, but its presence is noted in private spheres. **Harold Gould's** study of Lucknow Rikshawallahs brings the same argument where caste norms are set aside at workplace and is alive in public sphere
- The over representation of lower castes in menial jobs and poor socio-economic indicators such as anaemia, maternal mortality, life expectancy shows the disprivileges existing for lower castes

Untouchability- forms and perspective

Untouchability refers to a practice in which various types of segregation are imposed within the cultural framework of the caste. It takes the form of social sanctions and social disabilities which are ascriptive in nature within the ritual framework of the caste system

According to Prof. **Satyavrata**, untouchability is that system of society on account of which one individual cannot touch another individual and one society cannot touch another society on the basis of convention and if so touches, becomes profane and in order to remove that profanity has to perform penance.

D. N. Majumdar states that 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.

Though our Constitution outlawed the practice of untouchability and the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955 declared it as a legal offence, yet since Hindus are still deeply steeped in their concern for purity and pollution.

Untouchability is relative to one's caste position, for e.g. the Shudras treat the Dalits as untouchables, however at the same time, they themselves are treated as untouchables by the other higher castes.

Different forms of untouchability

Untouchability can take the form of exclusion, subordination and humiliation. Various forms of untouchability are-

- Prohibitions on commensuality, social mixing, using common wells, separate dwelling and so on. The Puruda Varnar of Tamil Nadu are most striking example of this segregation. They are a sub-caste which is given duty of washing clothes and providing other services to untouchables. They were considered untouchables even by the 'untouchables' themselves. They had a nocturnal sub-human existence and worked only during night as creatures of extreme abhorrence.

- Physical segregation for instance, Dalits usually reside at the outskirts of town. Institutional untouchability is practiced by cities as people living under bridge, slum dwellers are from lower caste

- Denied access to temples and to the services of the Brahmins. Higher caste children refusing the meal prepared by Dalit cook in schools

- Ambedkar highlights the social and economic boycotts of Dalits is more widespread as opposed to open violence

- Though many dalits have given up their traditional caste-based occupations yet a good number is still engaged in polluting occupations like dealing with dead bodies, sanitation workers. For instance, 98% Manual scavengers are from lower castes.

- Increasing crime rates against the deprived castes. As per the report of NCRB, cases of Rape against SC women, (including minors) account for 7.64% and ST women account for 15% out of the total cases reported.

- Various studies claim that SC/ST communities are over-represented in low-paying jobs and are under-represented in high-paying ones. This highlights the Casteist underbelly of the Indian private sector

Perspectives on Untouchability

Origin of untouchability

Ghurye- Historical accounts and religious texts have suggested various names for untouchables such as Nishads, Chandals, Kirat and so on as the people outside Varna system. Earlier Avarna were not untouchables, but the system evolved gradually in Post Vedic period as mentioned by texts like Manusmriti.

Vivekananda Jha - He uses a historic indological perspective to trace its origin. He traced origin of untouchability using ancient texts by finding words which would have been used for untouchables.

Gandhi vs Ambedkar

Gandhi and Ambedkar both addressed the oppression under caste system, where lower castes suffered through discrimination, isolation and untouchability. However, their perspectives and approaches differed a lot. Gandhi believed that caste system is important for Indian society as it provides order to people's live. He acknowledged that the contemporary caste became dysfunctional but he had reformist approach towards it. Ambedkar considered caste system as rigid system designed for the welfare of upper caste and demanded its overhaul.

Gandhi's perspective on caste system

Gandhi condemned the current caste system but supported Varna Vyavastha and Ashram Vyavastha as organizing principles of Indian society. He believed that each caste can complement other caste in varna system to establish an egalitarian society. He considered untouchability as moral stigma which can be erased by the acts of atonement

He believed that the existing caste system needs reforms like abolishment of untouchability, commensality, inter-caste marriages etc. His measures include educational empowerment, awareness creation and change of heart of upper caste

Dumont appreciated Gandhi's efforts on untouchability and claims that the situation has changed since then.

Ambedkar's perspective on caste system

He had a radical view of caste system and called for annihilation of caste system. His act of burning of Manusmriti was a call for the same. He counted on legislative measures and political empowerment of lower castes to improve their position in society. He considered Gandhian view as utopian where castes should voluntarily come forward to bridge their differences.

He believed Untouchables as a religious minority out of the realm of Hinduism. He had little faith in moral awakening strategy and wanted institutional changes like political reservation for depressed classes

Gandhi's Perspective on caste	Ambedkar's Perspective on caste
Gandhi believed caste as a way of life. He considered it as a binding social structure of Indian society	Ambedkar considered caste as cesspool of ignorance which acts as barrier in social, economic and political development of lower castes
He considered caste as an order given by god. Acknowledging the discriminative form it has taken in the present times, he called for reforms	He believed caste as an extension of institutional discrimination which demands for the destruction of caste system.
He called the untouchables as harijans ie people of god, to uplift their status	He rejected the name harijans and continue calling them Dalits which means oppressed or crushed
His reformist approach was in socio-economic sector. For instance, sanitation and swavalamban at sevagram, commensality etc	He demanded political changes to uplift dalits. For instance, reservation of seats for them

Steps taken by government to prevent untouchability

◎ The Constitution abolished untouchability (Article 17) which means is that no one can prevent Dalits from educating themselves, entering temples, using public facilities etc

◎ Reservations for members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in different spheres of public life including include reservation of seats in the State and Central legislatures

◎ National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) were set up to investigate and monitor all matters related to their safety

◎ The 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act revised and strengthened the legal provisions punishing acts of violence or humiliation against Dalits and Adivasis.

◎ Attitudinal change towards inter-caste marriages

◎ Inculcating values of equality and fraternity in the children and sensitizing them regarding caste discrimination

We have come across a long way in a fight against untouchability but to banish it totally we still need a more comprehensive approach which include participation form every strata of society