

# CHAPTER 3

## Social Institutions Continuity and Change

### Caste and the Caste System

'Caste' is the name of an ancient social institution that has been part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years.

- Caste is an institution uniquely associated with the Indian sub-continent.
- Although it is an institution characteristic of Hindu society, caste has spread to the major non-Hindu communities of the Indian sub-continent. This is specially true of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.
- As is well-known, the English word 'caste' is actually a borrowing from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning pure breed.
- The word refers to a broad institutional arrangement that in Indian languages (beginning with the ancient Sanskrit) is referred to by two distinct terms, *varna* and *jati*.
- *Varna*, literally 'colour', is the name given to a four-fold division of society into *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*.
- *Varna* excludes a significant section of the population composed of the 'outcastes', foreigners, slaves, conquered peoples and others, sometimes referred to as the *panchamas* or fifth category.
- *Jati* is a generic term referring to species or kinds of anything, ranging from inanimate objects to plants, animals and human beings.
- The four *varna* classification is common to all of India, the *jati* hierarchy has more local classifications that vary from region to region.

### Caste in the Past

- In its earliest phase, in the late Vedic period roughly between 900 - 500 BC, the caste system was really a *varna* system and consisted of only four major divisions. These divisions were not very elaborate or very rigid, and they were not determined by birth.

- It is only in the post Vedic period that caste became the rigid institution that is familiar to us from well-known definitions.
- The most commonly cited defining features of caste are the following:
  - Caste is determined by birth - a child is "born into" the caste of its parents. One can never change one's caste, leave it, or choose not to join it, although there are instances where a person may be expelled from their caste.
  - Membership in a caste involves strict rules about marriage. Caste groups are "endogamous", i.e. marriage is restricted to members of the group.
  - Caste membership also involves rules about food and food-sharing. What kinds of food may or may not be eaten is prescribed and who one may share food with is also specified.
  - Caste involves a system consisting of many castes arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status.
  - Castes also involve sub-divisions within themselves, i.e., castes almost always have sub-castes and sometimes sub-castes may also have sub-sub-castes.
  - Castes were traditionally linked to occupations. A person born into a caste could only practice the occupation associated with that caste, so that occupations were hereditary, i.e. passed on from generation to generation.
- Theoretically, the caste system can be understood as the combination of two sets of principles, one based on difference and separation and the other on wholism and hierarchy.
- Many of the scriptural rules of caste are thus designed to prevent the mixing of castes - rules ranging from marriage, food sharing and social interaction to occupation.
- The hierarchical ordering of castes is based on the distinction between 'purity' and 'pollution'.

- This is a division between something believed to be closer to the sacred (thus connoting ritual purity), and something believed to be distant from or opposed to the sacred, therefore considered ritually polluting.
- Castes that are considered ritually pure have high status, while those considered less pure or impure have low status.

### **Colonialism and Caste**

- The present form of caste as a social institution has been shaped very strongly by both the colonial period as well as the rapid changes that have come about in independent India.
- Initially, the British administrators began by trying to understand the complexities of caste in an effort to learn how to govern the country efficiently.
- Some of these efforts took the shape of very methodical and intensive surveys and reports on the 'customs and manners' of various tribes and castes all over the country.
- The most important official effort to collect information on caste was through the census.
- The land revenue settlements and related arrangements and laws served to give legal recognition to the customary (caste-based) rights of the upper castes.
- These castes now became land owners in the modern sense rather than feudal classes with claims on the produce of the land, or claims to revenue or tribute of various kinds.
- At the other end of the scale, towards the end of the colonial period, the administration also took an interest in the welfare of downtrodden castes, referred to as the 'depressed classes' at that time.
- It was as part of these efforts that the Government of India Act of 1935 was passed which gave legal recognition to the lists or 'schedules' of castes and tribes marked out for special treatment by the state.
- This is how the terms 'Scheduled Tribes' and the 'Scheduled Castes' came into being. Castes at the bottom of the hierarchy that suffered severe discrimination, including all the so-called 'untouchable' castes, were included among the Scheduled Castes.

### **Caste in the Present**

- Caste considerations had inevitably played a role in the mass mobilisations of the nationalist movement.
- Efforts to organise the "depressed classes" and particularly the untouchable castes predated the nationalist movement, having begun in the second half of the nineteenth century.

- This was an initiative taken from both ends of the caste spectrum - by upper caste progressive reformers as well as by members of the lower castes such as Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar in western India, Ayyankali, Sri Narayana Guru, Iyothedass and Periyar (E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker) in the South.
- Both Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar began organising protests against untouchability from the 1920s onwards.
- Anti-untouchability programmes became a significant part of the Congress agenda so that, by the time Independence was on the horizon, there was a broad agreement across the spectrum of the nationalist movement to abolish caste distinctions.
- Modern industry created all kinds of new jobs for which there were no caste rules.
- Urbanisation and the conditions of collective living in the cities made it difficult for the caste-segregated patterns of social interaction to survive.
- Recruitment to industrial jobs, whether in the textile mills of Mumbai (then Bombay), the jute mills of Kolkata (then Calcutta), or elsewhere, continued to be organised along caste and kinship-based lines.
- The middle men who recruited labour for factories tended to recruit them from their own caste and region so that particular departments or shop floors were often dominated by specific castes.
- 'Sanskritisation' refers to a process whereby members of a (usually middle or lower) caste attempt to raise their own social status by adopting the ritual, domestic and social practices of a caste (or castes) of higher status.
- Sanskritisation usually accompanies or follows a rise in the economic status of the caste attempting it, though it may also occur independently.
- 'Dominant caste' is a term used to refer to those castes which had a large population and were granted land rights by the partial land reforms effected after Independence.
- The intermediate castes became the 'dominant' castes in the country side and played a decisive role in regional politics and the agrarian economy. Examples of such dominant castes include the Yadavs of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Vokkaligas of Karnataka, the Reddys and Khammas of Andhra Pradesh, the Marathas of Maharashtra, the Jats of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh and the Patidars of Gujarat.

### **Changes in the caste system**

- Economic educational resources
- Opportunities offered by rapid development
- Public education
- Professional education in science, technology, medicine and management
- Expansion of public sector jobs

### **Tribal Communities**

- 'Tribe' is a modern term for communities that are very old, being among the oldest inhabitants of the sub-continent.
- Tribes in India have generally been defined in terms of what they were not.
- Tribes were communities that did not practice a religion with a written text; did not have a state or political form of the normal kind; did not have sharp class divisions; and, most important, they did not have caste and were neither Hindus nor peasants.

### **Classification of Tribes**

- In terms of positive characteristics, tribes have been classified according to their 'permanent' and 'acquired' traits.

#### **Permanent traits**

- About 85% of the tribal population lives in 'middle India', a wide band stretching from Gujarat and Rajasthan in the west to West Bengal and Odisha in the east, with Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and parts of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh forming the heart of this region.
- Of the remaining 15%, over 11% is in the North Eastern states, leaving only a little over 3% living in the rest of India.
- North Eastern states have the highest concentrations, with all states, except Assam, having concentrations of more than 30%, and some, like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland with more than 60% and upto 95% of tribal population.
- The ecological habitats covered includes hills, forests, rural plains and urban industrial areas.
- In terms of language, tribes are categorised into four categories. Two of them, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, are shared by the rest of the Indian population as well, and tribes account for only about 1% of the former and about 3% of the latter.
- The other two language groups, the Austric and Tibeto-Burman, are primarily spoken by tribals, who account for all of the first and over 80% of the second group.

- In physical-racial terms, tribes are classified under the Negrito, Australoid, Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryan categories.
- The biggest tribes are the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, Oraons, Minas, Bodos and Mundas, all of whom are at least a million strong.
- The total population of tribes amounts to about 8.2% of the population of India, or about 84 million persons according to the 2001 Census.

#### **Acquired traits**

- Classifications based on acquired traits use two main criteria - mode of livelihood, and extent of incorporation into Hindu society - or a combination of the two.
- On the basis of livelihood, tribes can be categorised into fishermen, food gatherers and hunters, shifting cultivators, peasants and plantation and industrial workers.
- From the tribes' point of view, apart from the extent of assimilation, attitude towards Hindu society is also a major criterion, with differentiation between tribes that are positively inclined towards Hinduism and those who resist or oppose it.

### **Tribal Identity**

- Tribal identities are formed by interactional process rather than any primordial (original, ancient) characteristics peculiar to tribes.
- The positive impact of successes - such as the achievement of statehood for Jharkhand and Chattisgarh after a long struggle - is moderated by continuing problems.
- Many of the states of the North-East, for example, have been living for decades under special laws that limit the civil liberties of citizens.
- Thus, citizens of states like Manipur or Nagaland don't have the same rights as other citizens of India because their states have been declared as 'disturbed areas'.
- Another significant development is the gradual emergence of an educated middle class among tribal communities.
- Two broad sets of issues have been most important in giving rise to tribal movements. These are issues relating to control over vital economic resources like land and specially forests, and issues relating to matters of ethnic-cultural identity. The two can often go together, but with differentiation of tribal society they may also diverge.

### **Family and Kinship**

- The structure of the family can be studied both as a social institution in itself and also in its relationship to other social institutions of society.
- In itself a family can be defined as nuclear or extended. It can be male-headed or female-headed. The line of descent can be matrilineal or patrilineal.
- The migration of men from the villages of the Himalayan region can lead to an unusual proportion of women-headed families in the village. Or the work schedules of young parents in the software industry in India may lead to increasing number of grandparents moving in as care-givers to young grandchildren.
- It is evident from the kind of changes that take place that not only have family structures changed, but cultural ideas, norms and values also change. These changes are however not so easy to bring about.

### **Nuclear and Extended Family**

- A nuclear family consists of only one set of parents and their children.
- An extended family (commonly known as the 'joint family') can take different forms, but has more than one couple, and often more than two generations, living together.

- This could be a set of brothers with their individual families, or an elderly couple with their sons and grandsons and their respective families. The extended family often is seen as symptomatic of India.

### **Diverse Forms of Family**

- With regard to the rule of residence, some societies are matrilocal in their marriage and family customs while others are patrilocal.
- In matrilocal, the newly married couple stays with the woman's parents, whereas in the second case the couple lives with the man's parents.
- With regard to the rules of inheritance, matrilineal societies pass on property from mother to daughter while patrilineal societies do so from father to son.
- A patriarchal family structure exists where the men exercise authority and dominance, and matriarchy where the women play a similarly dominant role.
- However, matriarchy, unlike patriarchy has been a theoretical rather than an empirical concept. There is no historical or anthropological evidence of matriarchy i.e., societies where women exercise dominance.
- However, there do exist matrilineal societies, i.e., societies where women inherit property from their mothers but do not exercise control over it, nor are they the decision makers in public affairs.

## Exercise

1. **Assertion (A):** Caste refers to a broad institutional arrangement in Indian languages.  
**Reason (R):** Indian society is divided into four-fold division called varna which distinct people on the basis of color.  
(a) Both A and R are true and R is the correct explanation of A.  
(b) Both A and R are true but R is not the correct explanation of A.  
(c) A is true and R is false.  
(d) A is false and R is true.
2. Which of the following are known as panchamans in Indian society?  
I. Shudras  
II. Slaves  
III. Foreigners  
(a) I and II  
(b) II and III  
(c) I and III  
(d) I, II and III
3. Caste system in India is recognized through which of the following factors?  
I. Endogamy  
II. Hierarchy  
III. Traditional occupation  
(a) I and II  
(b) I and III  
(c) II and III  
(d) All of the above
4. Which of the following set of principles are followed in caste system in India?  
(a) Differences and separation and wholism and hierarchy  
(b) Division of society into castes and jatis  
(c) Varna system and jatis  
(d) Endogamy and hierarchical nature of society
5. The hierarchical ordering of caste is based on which of the following distinction?  
(a) Castes and sub-castes  
(b) Four-fold division of society  
(c) Purity and pollution  
(d) Individual existence of castes
6. The present form of caste as a social institution has been shaped due to -  
(a) Colonialism and rapid changes post-independence  
(b) Sub-categorization of caste  
(c) Hierarchical nature of society  
(d) Untouchability
7. British administration tried to understand the caste complexities through which of the following ways?  
(a) Categorization of labors on the basis of castes  
(b) Methodical and intensive surveys  
(c) Imposition of land revenue  
(d) Economic status of population
8. **Assertion (A):** Caste system of today is more a product of colonialism than of ancient Indian tradition.  
**Reason (R):** Colonial government put efforts to understand the caste complexities to provide efficient governance.  
(a) Both A and R are true and R is the correct explanation of A.  
(b) Both A and R are true but R is not the correct explanation of A.  
(c) A is true and R is false.  
(d) A is false and R is true.
9. During colonial period, the legal recognition to the customary (caste-based) rights of the upper castes had been given through which of the following way?  
(a) Census  
(b) Caste-based surveys  
(c) Land revenue settlement  
(d) Establishment of industry
10. Which of the following act gave legal recognition to the 'schedules' of castes and tribes for special treatment?  
(a) Govt. of India Act 1909  
(b) Govt. of India Act 1919  
(c) Indian Independence Act, 1947  
(d) Govt. of India Act, 1935
11. Which of the following leaders took initiative to break the taboo of caste system?  
I. Ayyankali  
II. Sri Narayan Guru  
III. Iyothedass  
(a) I and III  
(b) II and III  
(c) I and II  
(d) All of the above

12. Societies, where women inherit property from their mothers but do not exercise control over it, is known as -  
 (a) Matrilineal (b) Matrilocal  
 (c) Matriarchal (d) Patriarchal
13. **Assertion (A):** Initiative to organize "depressed classes" taken by both upper and lower caste leaders.  
**Reason (R):** By the time Independence was on the horizon, there was a broad agreement across the spectrum of the nationalist movement to abolish caste distinctions.  
 (a) Both A and R are true and R is the correct explanation of A.  
 (b) Both A and R are true but R is not the correct explanation of A.  
 (c) A is true and R is false.  
 (d) A is false and R is true.
14. During colonial period, why recruitment to industrial jobs in the textile mills of Mumbai, the jute mills of Kolkata or elsewhere continued to organize along caste and kinship-based lines?  
 (a) Shortage of skilled labors among upper caste  
 (b) Lack of education  
 (c) Create dominance of specific caste  
 (d) Urbanization
15. In the sociology, 'dominant caste' refers to -  
 I. Large population of particular caste  
 II. Land rights granted post-independence  
 III. Intermediate castes  
 (a) I and II (b) II and III  
 (c) I and III (d) All of the above
16. 85% of tribal population lives in which of the following region of India?  
 (a) North-Eastern states  
 (b) Central India  
 (c) Bihar and Jharkhand  
 (d) Middle India
17. Tribes are categorized into which of the following set of languages?  
 I. Indo-Aryan and Dravidian  
 II. Austric and Tibeto-Burman  
 III. Dravidian and Austric  
 (a) I and II (b) II and III  
 (c) I and III (d) All of the above
18. Basket making and oil pressing is the occupation of which of the tribal group?  
 (a) Gonds (b) Ho and Munda  
 (c) Birhors (d) Santhals
19. The tribal movement in India has increased due to -  
 (a) Atrocities of non-tribals  
 (b) Control over vital economic resources and ethnic-cultural identity  
 (c) Migration of tribal population in the search of good education  
 (d) Loss of natural vegetation
20. The unusual proportion of women-headed families are found in village, the reason is -  
 (a) Migration of men from Himalayan region  
 (b) Feminization of agriculture  
 (c) Allotment of government schemes benefits to women  
 (d) Education facilities and employment

### Answer Keys

1. (b)    2. (b)    3. (d)    4. (a)    5. (c)    6. (a)    7. (b)    8. (a)    9. (c)    10. (d)
11. (d)    12. (a)    13. (b)    14. (c)    15. (d)    16. (d)    17. (a)    18. (c)    19. (b)    20. (a)