

4 CASTE SYSTEM

– Perspective on the study of caste systems:

G.S. Ghurye, M. N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille

– Features of caste system

– Untouchability: Forms and Perspectives.

G.S. GHURYE

Ghurye's approach towards caste is attributional. Attributional approach discusses primarily the significant features of the caste system and what distinguishes it from other forms of social stratification. For Ghurye each caste was separated from the other in a hierarchical order. This ordering sprang from the attributes of a caste. Ghurye cognitively combined historical, anthropological and sociological perspectives to understand caste and kinship system in India. He tried to analyze caste system through textual evidences using ancient texts, on the one hand and also from both structural and cultural perspectives, on the other hand. Ghurye studied caste system from a historical, comparative and integrative perspective. Later on he did comparative study of kinship of Indo-European cultures. In his study of caste and kinship, Ghurye emphasises two important points :

- The kin and caste networks in India had parallels in some other societies also.
- The kinship and caste in India served in the past as integrative frameworks.

The evolution of society was based on the integration of diverse, racial or ethnic groups through these networks. Ghurye highlights **six structural features of caste system** as follows:

- **Segmental division** : Membership of a caste group is acquired by birth and with it come the position in the rank order relative to other castes.
- **Hierarchy** : Following from the above, society was arranged in rank orders, or relations of superiority or inferiority. Thus Brahmins were accepted as highest in the hierarchy and untouchables at the very bottom.
- **Pollution and purity** : In this idea the whole effort of a caste was to avoid contamination from polluting object (those involved in unclean occupations or of the lowest castes). This shunning of pollution is reflected in the residential separation of the caste group.
- **Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections**: These were placed on every caste which gave permission to its members only to interact with particular groups of people. This included its dress, speech, customs and rituals and from whom they could accept food. The system was geared to maintain purity of the group members, hence of the caste group.
- **Lack of choice of occupation**: Ghurye felt that every caste had a traditional occupation. The clean castes had clean occupation whereas unclean and impure castes had defiling occupations.

- **Restrictions on marriage:** This trait of the castes was very distinct and essential to keeping it together as a group that maintained its own distinct character. Essentially it maintained that one could only marry within ones castes.

Besides the above characteristics, Ghurye laid particular stress on **endogamy** as the most important feature of the caste system. Any effective unit of the caste hierarchy is marked by endogamy. Every caste had in the past segmented into smaller sub-divisions or sub-castes. Each of these sub-castes practiced endogamy. For example, Vaishya castes are divided into various sub-castes such as Agrawal, Maheshwari etc.

Caste is also linked with kinship through caste endogamy and also clan (gotra) exogamy. Gotra has been treated as thoroughly exogamous unit by the Brahmins and later by the non-Brahmins. The basic notion here is that all the members of a gotra are related to one another, through blood, i.e., they have rishi (sage) as their common ancestor. Therefore, marriage between two persons of the same gotra will lead to incestuous relationship. It will lead the lineage of the gotra to near extinction.

The relationship between caste and kinship is very close because

- exogamy in our society is largely based on kinship, either real or imaginary, and
- the effective unit of caste, sub-caste is largely constituted of kinsmen.

To Ghurye, these are three types of marriage restrictions in our society, which shape the relationship between caste and kinship. These are endogamy, exogamy and hypergamy. Exogamy can be divided into parts:

- sapinda or prohibited degrees of kin, and
- sept or gotra exogamy.

The gotra were kin categories of Indo-European cultures which systematized the rank

and status of the people. These categories were derived from rishis (saints) of the past. These rishis were the real or eponymous founder of the gotra and charna. In India, descent has not always been traced to the blood tie. The lineages were often based on spiritual descent from sages of the past. Outside the kinship, one might notice the guru-shisya (teacher-student) relationship, which is also based on spiritual descent. A disciple is proud to trace his descent from a master.

Likewise, caste and sub-caste integrated people into a ranked order based on norms of purity-pollution. The rules of endogamy and commensality marked off castes from each other. This was integrative instrument, which organized from into a totality or collectivity. The Hindu religion provided the conceptual and ritualistic guidelines for this integration. The Brahmins of India played a key role in legitimizing the caste ranks and orders through their interpretation of Dharmashastra, which were the compendia of sacred codes.

M.N. SRINIVAS

Srinivas approach to study of caste is attributional. The sociologists using the attributional approach stress the attributes of caste. However, each of them lays emphasis on one or other of these attributes and how they affect interaction. In case of Srinivas, we find that he chooses to study the structure of relations arising between castes on the basis of these attributes. Thus he introduces dynamic aspect of caste identity very forcefully. This aspect becomes clearer in Srinivas's work on positional mobility known as 'Sanskritisation' and concept of 'Dominant Castes'.

Srinivas assigned certain attributes to the caste system. These are :

- **Hierarchy :** To Srinivas, hierarchy is the core or the essence of the caste system. It refers to the arrangements of hereditary groups in a

rank order. He points out that it is status of the top-most or Brahmins and the bottom-most or untouchables, which is the clearest in terms of rank. The middle regions of hierarchy are the most flexible, who may be defined as members of the middle ranks.

- **Occupational differentiation** : Srinivas finds a close relationship between a caste and its occupation. He says that caste is nothing more 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 are also found among castes. There is a dietetic hierarchy and restrictions on acceptance of food.
- **Pollution**: The distance between castes is maintained by the principles of pollution. Srinivas too argues that the castes must not come into contact with anything that is polluted whether an object or being. Any contact with polluted renders a caste impure and demands that the polluted caste undergo purification rites. If pollution is serious such as when a high caste person has sexual relations with an untouchable, the person involved may be removed from his or her caste.
- **Caste Panchayats and Assemblies**: Besides the above mentioned attributes of a caste, every caste is subject to the control of an order maintain body or a Panchayat. Elder 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 of caste in other villages.

Srinivas views caste as segmentary system. Every caste, for him, is divided into sub-castes which are:

- The unit of endogamy;
- Whose members follow a common occupation;
- The units of social and ritual life;
- Whose members share a common culture; and
- Whose members are governed by the same authoritative body, viz., the Panchayat.

From the above, we can infer that the attributes of a caste definitely determined the nature of inter-caste relations. These attributes or customs of caste also determine the rank of a caste. This becomes obvious in the work of Srinivas on caste mobility or sanskritisation.

SANSKRITISATION

We have seen above that how every caste is assigned in the caste rank order on the basis of the purity and impurity of its attributes. In his study of a Mysore village, Srinivas finds that at some time or the other, every caste tries to change its rank in the hierarchy by giving up its attributes and trying to adopt those of castes above them. This process of attempting to change one's rank by giving up attributes that define a caste as low and adopting attributes that the indicative of higher status is called 'sanskritisation'. This process essentially involves a change in one's dietary habits from non-vegetarianism to vegetarianism, and a change in one's occupation habits from an 'unclean' to a 'clean' occupation. The attributes of a caste become the basis of interaction between castes. The creation of pattern of interaction and inter-relations is best expressed in Srinivas' use of the concept of 'dominant caste'.

Features of Sanskritisation

The concept of Sanskritisation has been integrated with economic and political domination, that is, the role of local 'dominant caste' in the process of cultural transmission has been

stressed. Though for some time, the lower castes imitated Brahmins but soon the local dominant caste came to be initiated. And the locally dominant caste was often a non-Brahmin caste.

Sanskritisation occurred sooner or later in those casts which enjoyed political and economic power but were not rated high in ritual ranking, that is, there was a gap between their ritual and politico-economic positions. This was because without Sanskritisation, claim to a higher position was not fully effective. The three main axes of power in the caste system are the ritual, the economic and the political ones. The possession of power in any one sphere usually leads to the acquisition of power in the other two. But Srinivas mentions that inconsistencies do occur.

Economic betterment is not a necessary precondition to Sanskritisation, nor must economic development necessarily lead to Sanskritisation. However, sometimes a group (caste, tribe) may start by acquiring political power and this may lead to economic betterment and Sanskritisation, Srinivas has given the example of untouchables of Rampura village in Mysore who have got increasingly Sanskritized though their economic condition has remained almost unchanged. Economic betterment, the acquisition of political power, education, leadership, and desire to move up in the hierarchy, are all relevant factors in Sanskritisation, and each case of Sanskritisation may show all or some of these factors mixed up in different measures.

Sanskritisation is a two-way process. Not only a caste 'took' from the caste higher to it but in turn it gave something to the caste. We find Brahmins worshipping local deities who preside over epidemics, cattle, children's lives, and crops, besides the great gods of all India Hinduism. It is not unknown for a Brahmin to make a blood-sacrifice to one of these deities through the medium of a non-Brahmin friend (Srinivas). Though local cultures seem to 'receive' more than they 'give', yet Sanskritic Hinduism has also absorbed local and folk elements. The absorption is done

in such a way that there is continuity between the folk or little tradition and the great tradition.

Unit of mobility is group and not an individual or family.

The British rule provided impetus to the process of Sanskritisation but political independence has weakened the trend towards this change. The emphasis is now on the vertical mobility and not on the horizontal mobility.

Describing social change in India in terms of Sanskritisation and Westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural and not in structural terms. Srinivas himself has conceded that Sanskritisation involves 'positional change' in the caste system without any structural change.

Sanskritisation does not automatically result in the achievement of a higher status for the group. The group must be content to wait an indefinite period and during this period it must maintain a continuous pressure regarding its claim. A generation or two must pass usually before a claim begins to be accepted. In many cases, the claim of the caste may not be accepted even after a long time.

The fact that Sanskritisation may not help a lower caste to move up does not prevent it to discard the consumption of beef, change polluting occupation, stop drinking alcohol, and adopt some Sanskritic customs, beliefs and deities. Thus, the process of Sanskritisation may remain popular without achieving the goal of mobility.

Factors Promoting Sanskritisation

Factors that have made Sanskritisation possible are industrialization, occupational mobility, developed communicating, spread of literacy and western technology. No wonder, the spread of Sanskritic theological ideas immersed under the British rule. The development of communications carried Sanskritisation to areas previously inaccessible and the spread of literacy carried it to groups very low in the caste hierarchy. M.N. Srinivas has specifically referred to one factor which has helped the spread of Sanskritisation

among the low castes. It is the separation of ritual acts from the accompanying mantras (citations) which facilitated the spread of Brahminical rituals among all Hindu castes, including the untouchables. The restrictions imposed by the Brahmins on the non-twice-born castes banned only the chanting of mantras from the Vedas. Thus, the low caste people could adopt the social practices of the Brahmins. This made Sanskritisation feasible.

According to Srinivas, the political institution of parliamentary democracy has also contributed to the increased Sanskritisation. Prohibition, a Sanskritic value, has been mentioned in the Constitution of India. Some states have introduced it wholly or partially.

IDEA OF DOMINANT CAST

Besides caste, Srinivas looks for yet another source or manifestation of tradition. He found it in the notion of 'dominant caste'. He first proposed it in his early papers on the village of Rampura. The concept has been discussed and applied to a great deal in work on social and political organization in India. He had defined dominant caste in terms of six attributes placed in conjunction:

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

Of the above attributes of the dominant caste, the following three are important:

- numerical strength,
- economic power through ownership of land, and
- political power.

Accordingly, a dominant caste is any caste that has all three of the above attributes in a village community. The interesting aspect of this concept is that the ritual ranking of caste no longer remains the major basis of its position in the social hierarchy. Even if a caste stands low in the social hierarchy because of being ranked low, it can become the dominant ruling caste or group in a village if it is numerically large, owns land and has political influence over village matters. There is no doubt that a caste with relatively higher in ritual rank would probably find it easier to become dominant. But this is not the case always.

In his study of Rampur village, there are a number of castes including Brahmins, peasants and untouchables. The peasants are 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 are the dominant caste in the village. All the other castes of the village stand in a relationship of service to the dominant caste, i.e., they are at the back of the dominant caste.

Srinivas was criticized for this concept with the charge that it was smuggled from the notion of dominance, which emerged from African sociology. Repudiating the critique, Srinivas asserted that the idea of dominant caste given by him had its origin in the field work of Coorgs of South India. His field work had impressed upon him that communities, such as the Coorgs and the Okkaligas, wielded considerable power at the local level and shared such social attributes as numerical preponderance, economic strength and clean ritual status. He further noted that the dominant caste could be a local source of sanskritisation. Sanskritisation and dominant caste are therefore representation of Indian tradition. And, in this conceptual framework, the traditions of the lower castes and Dalits have no place, nowhere in village India; the subaltern groups occupy the status of dominant caste.

LOUIS DUMONT

Louis Dumont was primarily concerned with the ideology of the caste system. His understanding of caste lays emphasis on attributes of caste that is why; he is put in the category of those following the attributional approach to the caste system. For him, caste is a set of relationships of economic, political and kinship systems, sustained by certain 'values', which are mostly religious in nature. Dumont says that caste is not a form of stratification but a special form of inequality, whose essence has to be deciphered by the sociologists. Here, Dumont identifies 'hierarchy's is the essential value underlying the caste system, supported by Hinduism.

Dumont starts with Bogle's definition of caste and says that it divides the whole Indian society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics :

- Separation on the basis of rules of the caste in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food);
- Interdependent of work or division of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and
- Finally gradation of status or hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior to inferior to one another.

Dumont views that this definition indicates the main apparent characteristics of the caste system. He describes mainly three things:

- India is composed of many small territories and castes;
- Every caste is limited to particular and definite geographic area; and
- Marrying outside one's own caste is not possible in the caste system.

In fact, Dumont highlights the 'state of mind', which it expressed by the emergence in various

situations of castes. He calls caste system as a system of 'ideas and values', which is a 'formal comprehensible rational system'. His analysis is based on a single principle, i.e., the opposition of pure and impure. This opposition underlines 'hierarchy', which means superiority of the pure and inferiority of impure. This principle also underlies 'separation' which means pure and the impure must be kept separate.

- Dumont felt that the study of the caste system is useful for the knowledge of India, and it is an important task of general sociology.
- He focused on the need to understand the ideology of caste as reflected in the classical texts, historical examples etc.
- He advocated the use of an **Indological and structuralist approach** to the study of caste system and village social structure in India. He viewed that 'Indian sociology' is that specialized branch which stands at the confluence of Indology and sociology and which he advocates at the right type of 'mix' prerequisite to the understanding of Indian sociology.
- From this perspective, Dumont himself, in his *Homo Hierarchicus*, has built up a model of Indian civilization, which is based on a non-competitive ritual hierarchical system. Dumont's analysis of caste system is based on the classical literature, historical examples etc.

Dumont's Concept of Pure and Impure

While considering the concept of pure and impure, Dumont had two questions in mind: Why is this distinction applied to hereditary groups? And, if it accounts for the contrast between Brahmins and untouchables, can it account equally for the division of society into a large number of groups, themselves sometimes extremely sub-divided? He did not answer these questions directly. But, the opposite has always been two extreme categories, i.e., Brahmin and untouchables.

- The Brahmins assigned with the priestly functions, occupied the top rank in the social hierarchy and were considered 'pure' as compared to other castes.
- The untouchables, being 'impure', and segregated outside the village, were not allowed to draw water from the same wells from which the Brahmins did so.
- Besides this, they did not have any access to Hindu temples, and suffered from various other disabilities.
- Dumont said that this situation was somewhat changed since the Gandhian agitation and when India attained independence. Untouchability was considered illegal; Gandhi renamed untouchables as 'Harijan's or 'Sons of Hari', that is, creatures of God.

Untouchables are specialized in 'impure' tasks, which lead to the attribution of a massive and permanent impurity to some categories of people. Dumont highlights temporary and permanent impurity.

- In larger areas of the world, death, birth and other such seclusion of the affected persons, for instance, the newly delivered mother was actually excluded from the church for forty days at the end of which she would present herself carrying a lighted candle and would be met at the church porch by the priest.
- In India, persons affected by this kind of event are treated as impure for a prescribed period, and Indians themselves identify this impurity with that of the untouchables. In his work *The History of Dharmashastra*, **P.V. Kane** writes that a man's nearest relatives and his best friends become untouchable for him for a certain time as a result of these events.

According to Harika, there are three kinds of purity:

- bearing of the family (Kula),
- objects of everyday use (Artha), and
- the body.

For the body, the main thing is the morning attention to personal hygiene, culminating in the daily bath. Even, the objects are considered as pure and impure; silk is purer than cotton, gold than silver, than bronze, than copper. These objects are not simply polluted by the contact but by the use to which they are put and used by the person. Now-a-days, a new garment or vessel can be received from anybody. It is believed that a person's own bed, garments, wife, child and water pot are pure for his own self and family and for others they are impure.

Dumont feels one cannot speak of the castes without mentioning the varna, to which Hindus frequently attribute the castes themselves, India has the traditional hierarchy of varna, 'colours' or estates whereby four categories are distinguished:

- The higher is or that of the Brahmins or priest, below them are the Kshatriyas or warriors, then the Vaishyas, in modern usage merchants, and finally, the Shudras, the servants or have-nots.
- There is one more category, the untouchables, who are outside the classification system.
- Dumont maintains that many of the Indologists confuse the Varna with caste, mainly because the classical literature is concerned almost entirely with the varnas.
- Caste and Varna are to be understood with relationship of hierarchy and power.

By his interpretation, caste was different from other forms of social stratification through the 'disjunction' of ritual status and secular (political and economic) power within the same social system. The subordination of the political and economic criteria of social stratification to that of ritual status in Dumont's model, however, plays down the significance of social change in colonial and contemporary times. Did not caste lose its political significance as late in the 18th and 19th centuries? As for what has happening at the 20th century, although Dumont explicitly recognized the emergence of inter-caste competitiveness in place of a structure of independence as a departure

from tradition. He regarded this as behavioural change, rather than a radical transformation of the system as a whole, at the level of values or principles. Madan presumed that Dumont's analysis is an exercise in deductive logic.

In the last, Dumont discusses the significant changes in the castes,

- He views that traditional interdependence of castes has been replaced by "a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essential, and identical and in competition in one another." Dumont calls this the 'substantialization of castes'.
- An inventory of sources of change in the caste system lists judicial and political changes, social-religious reforms, westernization, and growth of modern professionals, urbanization, spatial mobility and the growth of market economy. But, despite all these factors making for change, the most ubiquitous and the general form, the change has taken in contemporary times is one of a 'mixture', or 'combination', of traditional and modern features.

ANDRE BETEILLE

Beteille study on caste is reflexive, distinctive, dynamic and analytical, as against Ghurye, Dumont, and Srinivas sociology of caste. Dumont considers caste as a sacred cow driven by the universal superiority of Brahmins, dominating in ritual sphere or in the status hereby. Srinivas considers that Sanskrit behaviour or way of life is mostly solicited by ethnic group of people in Indian society. So Dumont and Srinivas along with Ghurye, explicitly or implicitly speak that Brahminic superiority and Sanskrit exclusivity. Andre Beteille tries to study caste beyond these perspectives.

According to Beteille, caste is an objective reality. Its role and structural character should be studied from empirical perspective. His understanding of caste comes out of the field data, collected from Sripuram village of Tanjore district

of Tamil Nadu. In this village three major caste groups are present – Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidians. Between Brahmins and Adi-Dravidians a huge cultural, symbolic and relational gap is found. Beteille finds out that Dumont's 'theory of hierarchy' carries relative significance to understand the disharmonic relationship between Brahmins and Adi-Dravidians. These two castes are placed in two extreme position of caste hierarchy. He empathises with M.N. Srinivas to understand the rise of non-Brahmins in the secular sphere of caste hierarchy. Controlling village land and dominating in village, local and state politics, these groups intensified the emergence and consolidation of dominant caste.

His sociology of caste criticizes Srinivas, Dumont and Ghurye on the ground that Brahminic exclusivity and superiority is not a matter of fact. It is evident from his study of Sripuram. Brahmins of Sripuram are largely divided into two groups: Srivaishnav and Samarthas, distinctively different from each other in terms of the ritual practices, symbols, doctrinal affinity and way of life. Residential areas of both the castes are also strictly different and both the groups practice endogamy implying that a sub-caste should be considered as caste. Samarthas are further divided in 4 major groups, and these groups are further divided into sub-groups. This study of segmentation of caste is largely influenced by the writings of his teacher and old friend Evans Pritchard, who in his study of Neurs talk about segmentation of tribe.

According to Beteille, Brahmins never follow a distinctive identity, ritual pattern and way of life. What means sanskritisation to one aspiring caste may not be meaning to other. So Brahmins being so segmented, it is too difficult to believe that the superiority is historic, continuous and undiluted as presumed by homes Dumont. Caste does not determine social commensality amongst people. It is evident from Samarthas divided on the basis of economic standing into three broad groups such as an upper class, middle class and lower class. Beteille finds out that caste is not only a source

of social exclusion only rather both caste and poverty are two distinctive dissensions to social inequality in India. Exploring different genesis to social exclusion, he concludes by saying, that social inequality in India has multiple dimensions and caste is one of it. Caste and class is not the only source to explain all possible sources of inequality as highlighted by structural functionalist on one hand and Marxists on other. Following the footsteps of Max Weber he indicates that structure exists in many forms and in village India source of the structure are :

- unequal of distribution of land and giving rise to class structure.
- unequal access to power.
- unequal access to status on the basis of caste identity.

Based on his study, title of his first book is 'Class Status and Power: The study of structure in a Tagore village'.

Beteille considers that Bhakti movement Backward caste movement, dalit mobilization potentially question to hierarchical gradation of values giving rise to the emergence of plural values competing with each other. (Existentialism competing with spiritualism, materialism competing with moralism) resulting in competitive values, rising in Indian society, reflecting on social change.

According to Beteille, Caste old is replaced by caste new than caste in Indian being replaced by class in India. Thus Indian modernity is typically Indian in character, exclusive and different from modernization of West, but some of the European suggest fail to understand. So they conclude that India provides hierarchy and European society produces structure.

FEATURES OF CASTE SYSTEM

The important features of caste as unit are hereditary membership, endogamy, fixed occupation and caste councils, while the features of caste as a system are hierarchy,

commercial restrictions and restrictions with regard to physical and social distance.

FEATURES OF CASTE AS A SYSTEM

Hierarchy Based on Wealth

No two castes have an equal status. One caste has either a low or a high status in relation to other castes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the exact or even the approximate place of each caste in the hierarchical system. Two methods have mainly been used in assessing the hierarchy: observational method and opinion-assessing method. In the former, either the attributional method or the interactional method has been used for ranking the castes. The attributional method determines the rank of a caste by its behaviour, for example, its customs, practice of degrading occupation, vegetarianism, habits of liquor-drinking etc., the interactional method evaluates ranks of two given castes in relationship to each other by observing the commensally interaction and marital relations, etc. between the two castes. If a caste 'A' accepts a girl in marriage from a caste 'B' but does not give a girl in that caste, 'A' will have higher status than 'B'. This is because of the hypergamy rule according to which a girl of a lower caste can marry in a higher caste but not vice-versa. Similarly, if the members of a caste 'A' do not accept food from the members of caste 'B' but members of caste 'B' accepts it; it will indicate the higher status of 'A'.

In the 'opinion-assessing' method, the ranks of various castes in the collective caste hierarchy are assessed on the basis of the opinions of various respondents from different castes. The advantage in the 'opinion-assessing' method over the 'observational' method is that in the former, it is possible to regard hierarchy and interaction as two variables and study their relationship. A.C. Mayer, M.N. Srinivas, D.N. Majumdar, S.C. Dube, Pauline Mahar, etc., had used the observational method while McKim Marriott and Staley Freed had used the opinion-assessment method in analyzing the caste ranks in the caste hierarchy.

S.C. Dube used only one criterion for determining the caste hierarchies in three villages in Telangana: which castes can theoretically take food from which other castes. Mayer on the other hand, used the criterion of 'commensality' which involves principally the giving and taking of food and water and sharing of the same pipe (hukka) among various castes. Pauline Mahar ranked castes with regard to their ritual purity and pollution by using a multiple-scaling technique.

In recent years, though there has been a change in some characteristics of the caste system but there has been no change at all in the hierarchical characteristic.

Commensal Restrictions

There are rules laid down with regard to the kind of food that can be accepted by a person from different castes. According to Blunt, there are seven important taboos in this respect:

- commensally taboo, which determines rules regarding persons in whose company a man may eat;
- cooking taboo, which lays down rules regarding persons who may cook food that a man may eat;
- eating taboo, which prescribes rituals to be observed at the time of eating;
- drinking taboo, which prescribes rules regarding accepting water etc., from the persons;
- food taboo, which prescribes rules regarding the kind of food a man may eat with members of other castes;
- smoking taboo, which lays down rules regarding persons whose pipe (hukka) a man may smoke; and
- vessels taboo, which determines the types of vessels to be used or avoided for cooking food to protect oneself from being polluted.

Blunt believes that the commensality restriction is the result of marriage restriction, but Hutton claims it is the other way round, if one

comes before the other at all. On the basis of the severity of the food taboo, Blunt has classified castes into five groups:

- castes which take the kachcha (cooked with water) and pucca (cooked with ghee) food cooked only by a member of their own endogamous group;
- castes which eat food cooked by the members of own caste and also by Brahmins;
- castes which take food cooked by the members of own caste or by Brahmins or by Rajputs;
- castes which take food cooked by the members of own caste or by Brahmins or Rajputs or by lower castes of rank which they regard as at least equal to their own; and
- castes which eat food cooked by almost anyone.

Hutton had criticized this classification because of the distinct restrictions on the kachcha and pucca food. Some castes which fall into one group as regards the kachcha food will fall into another in regard to the pucca food about which they are not so strict. The various castes do not fall into uniform groups. In the last few decades, however, we find these commensal restrictions are no longer rigidly observed. In other words, there is change in the commensality characteristics of the caste system.

Compelling Religious Sanctions on Social Participation

Restrictions on social interaction have been imposed because of the belief that pollution can be carried by mere bodily contact. It is because of such belief that pollution can be carried by mere bodily contact. It is because of such beliefs that the low caste people engaged in inferior occupations are avoided by the upper caste people. Likewise, the Chamars, dhobis, doms and hundreds of beef-eating low castes, commonly known as untouchables, are shunned by the high caste Hindus. There are also specific rules for greeting and interacting with members of high or intermediate caste.

The Outcaste substratum

Castes engaged in defiling or menial or polluting occupations are treated as untouchables. They are called outcaste, depressed classes or scheduled castes. These castes are believed to have descended from the races originally inhabiting India before the invasion of the Aryans. Later they accepted servitude on the lowest fringes of Hindu society. They mostly live outside the village and eke out their existence by labour like scavenging, shoe-making, tanning, etc. They are not permitted to draw water from wells used by the upper caste people. They are even debarred from the use of public roads, schools, temples, cremation grounds, hotels and tea-shops. Their presence and their touch as thought to contaminate others. In the Peshwa period, Doms were not permitted to enter Poona city between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. because it was thought that even their shadows could pollute the high caste people. For the same reason, Brahmin doctors in South India used to wrap their hands with a silken cloth before examining the pulse of their Sudra patients. On the same ground, Panam (basket-maker), Tiyaans (toddy-drawer), Pulayan, Shanani and other lower castes in South India were to maintain a distance of thirty-six, seventy-two or ninety-six paces from these people, depending on their status. Caste mores have held these untouchable castes down in abysmal ignorance and degradation on the assumption that they suffer justly for their vicious deeds in previous lives. However, many of the prohibitions imposed on the outcaste have now been relaxed. But, though legally these restrictions have been removed, and socially also pollution is no longer treated very seriously by the majority of the high caste Hindus, yet we continue to find the practicing of some restrictions in ritual situations, though no longer enforced in ordinary day-to-day secular life.

FEATURES OF CASTE AS A UNIT

Ascribed Status

The membership of an individual in a caste is determined by his birth. Since each cast has its

own rank in relation to other castes, the high or low status of an individual depends upon the ritual status of the caste in which he is born. In fact, every aspect of the life of an orthodox Hindu hinges on his birth. His domestic ceremonies and customs, temple worship, circle of friends and occupation, all depend upon the level of the caste into which he is born.

Endogamy

The members of a caste have to marry in their own caste and sub-caste. Endogamy has, thus, been permanently enforced within caste groups.

Forced Occupation

Each caste has a fixed hereditary occupation. There is an old saying, once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin and once a Chamar, always a Chamar. Since certain occupations are considered unclean, persons following them become untouchable and anyone adopting them, unless in company with his caste, must necessarily be outcaste to preserve the whole caste from pollution. But this also does not mean that all Brahmins have always to remain engaged in priestly occupation, or all Rajputs are always to take to protecting function by joining the military, etc.

Under certain circumstances, some members in a caste were permitted to change their occupations. Similarly, different sub-castes of the same caste are found engaged in different occupations. For example, four sub-castes of a Khatik caste (a caste of butcher) in Uttar Pradesh are engaged in different occupations of butchery, masonry (rajgir), rope-making and selling of fruits (mewa farosh). Similarly, Teli caste in Bengal has two divisions, Tili and Teli, the former engaged in pressing oil and the later in selling oil since the pressing of oil-seeds is stigmatized as a degrading occupation because it destroys life by crushing the seeds. Tilis are treated as untouchable but not the Telis. Telis will outcaste a member who should venture to press it. The change of occupation did not necessarily involve the change of caste unless it involved the change of status.

Though generally the occupational restrictions imposed by caste have a religious motive but sometimes they may have a purely economic purpose also. For example, O'Malley refer to Sonars (goldsmiths) of one district in Madhya Pradesh who have a feast at which the caste men take oath that they will not reveal the amount of alloy decided to be mixed with gold by the Sonars on pain of being outcasted.

After industrialization of the country, particularly after the two World Wars, a significant change has come to be observed in these characteristics of the traditional occupation of caste. Restriction on change of occupation has been weakened and occupational mobility has become feasible.

Caste Councils

Each caste has a council of its own, known as caste panchayat. This panchayat exercised tremendous power over its members till recently. Today, though some caste panchayats are found to have branches all over India because of the development of the postal system and rapid communications of various kinds but till few decades back, these panchayats acted only for a limited area, an area small enough for the members of the council to assemble and for members of the caste within the area to have some knowledge of each other as a general rule. Local conditions, such as ease of communication, deter in the area within which the caste council functions. Some of the offences dealt with by these panchayats till recently were: eating and drinking with other castes and sub-castes with whom such intercourse was forbidden, keeping as concubine a woman of other caste, adultery with a married woman, refuse to fulfil a promise of marriage, non-payment of debt, petty assaults, breaches of customs, and so on. The mode of punishment usually adopted was out casting, fine, feast to caste men, corporal punishment etc. (Ghurye). All the members of the caste were obliged to accept the verdict of their panchayat. Even in the British period, these panchayats were so powerful that they could re-try cases which as

once decided by the civil and criminal courts. In a way, thus, a caste panchayat was a semi-sovereign body.

The officials of the panchayat who perform executive and judicial functions may either be nominated or elected or may be hereditary or some may be elected while others may be hereditary. Blunt point out that lower the caste in the social scale, stronger its combination and the most efficient its organization. The procedure observed for trial is extremely simple and informal.

Referring to the authority enjoyed by these caste councils, Kapadia has referred to certain examples pertaining to three periods – 1962, 1912, and 1861. Pointing to the period 1861, he gives two examples of a civil judge of Maharashtra who had married a widow, and the couple was so much humiliated by their caste council that they had to commit suicide.

UNTOUCHABILITY : FORMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Untouchability in India goes back to hoary past, though its origin and practice remain vague or unknown. Till the early 1930s, the *de jure* definition of the depressed classes, as they were then known, was in terms of the religious concept of pollution. The depressed classes were defined as "Hindu castes, contact with whom entails purification on the part of high-caste Hindus" (Dushkin). In 1951 census, the Census Commissioner J.H. Hutton adopted several criteria to be employed for identifying the depressed classes. These criteria did not work well. Therefore, some adjustments were made before the promulgation of the schedule in 1935.

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, the practice of untouchability has not been completely uprooted in the social and religious life of the country. Thus,

untouchability may be understood from two angles :

- the stigma attached to certain people because of ceremonial pollution they allegedly convey, and
- the set-practice engaged in the rest of the society to protect itself from the pollution conveyed by the untouchables.

The social stigma of the untouchables manifests itself in all walks of life. They are denied access to temples and to the services of the Brahmins and are shunned by the higher castes. They are born as impure and live as impure. The rest of the society is so much concerned about purity that they permanently keep untouchables in a state of economic, social and political subordination. The stigma, congenital according to one's caste, lasts for a lifetime and cannot be eliminated by rite or deed. Defined in relation to behaviour, untouchability refers to the set of practices followed by the rest of society to protect itself from the pollution conveyed by the untouchables. However, this concern with ritual pollution is not limited to the role of untouchables; it also served to keep the untouchables in an inferior economic and political position through physical separation. It is generally believed that the untouchable groups have come to realize that their problem can be solved only through effective political action. In recent times, due to reservation of posts in Parliament, Vidhan Sabhas, jobs educational institutions, etc., and other privileges granted by the government, a low ritual-status man has a better chance to achieve high economic and political status while high social status becomes an individual matter. Sociologists like L.P. Vidyarthi, Sachchidananda, etc. have attempted to study social transformation of dalits with reference to the caste disabilities, their educational efforts, acceptance of innovations, political consciousness, integration with the larger society, level of aspiration, internalization of modern values, position of women, their leadership, dalit movements and so on.

Though many dalits have given up their traditional caste-based occupations yet a good number is still engaged in polluting occupations. The change and diversification from polluting occupations has not only moved the stigma of their untouchability but has also enabled many to rise in class mobility. Some of them are owners of landed and household properties. They have been beneficiaries of various economic benefits of properties. They have been beneficiaries of various economic benefits offered to the scheduled castes by the government. The status disabilities now largely confined to the village discriminations in the matter of using the public wells or the temples are not as widespread as before. High public servants and those who occupy higher position are less subject to disabilities in social intercourse. There now exists a direct correlation between the politico-economic status of an individual and his social status. In some cases, however, their ascriptive status scores over their achieved status, for example, in the field of marriage, the entry of a Harijan in modern profession like medicine, engineering, administration, colleges. This is partly because of the stereotyped hatred and partly because of competition and jealousy on account of protective discrimination in their favour. Even the Harijan elite studied by Sachidanand in Bihar in 1976 pointed out such jealousy.

A large number of Harijans suffer from an inbred inferiority complex which makes them sensitive to any treatment which they think smacks of discrimination. This does not mean that such alleged discrimination is always made and accusation is true. The immobility of the Harijans has also given place to mobility. This has been made possible by migration from rural to urban areas, education and entry in public services and in politics. All this points out how the structural distance between the dalits and others has considerably narrowed.

Dalits are a marginal group in rural India, both in economic sense and in view of low-status members of Hindu society. The two features observed about dalits in rural society are:

- most dalits do not own land nor are they tenants, and
- most dalits earn an important part of their income by working on the land of others and/or by attaching themselves to landholding cultivators.

The employment of the dalit labour is determined by agricultural product and wages paid. The higher demand is at the time of harvest. The demand for the labour increase when there is more cultivable land, more irrigation, more fertilizers and more capital. Modern agricultural implements like tractors, etc., increase the demand for skilled labourers but decrease the number of persons needed. The employer (landlord) gets labour from dalits as well as non-dalits. The labour, thus, is not homogeneous. Preference is always given to non-dalits as they are considered more hardworking. It is for this reason that the dalit in rural areas is referred to as 'marginal'.

PERSPECTIVES

Gandhian perspective to untouchability is reformistic. He believed that untouchability is a crime against God and humanity. Being a true humanist, he believed that every human is a child of god; everyone is equal in the eyes of God. The value of equality is cherished in Hindu Dharmashastra.

Gandhi believed that untouchability is a product of aggressive caste system driven by the principles of individualism and materialism. He appreciated Varna system because it is giving way to hereditary learning of occupation without conceptualizing any occupation is superior or inferior. Gandhi speaks about division of labour dealing to self-sufficiency in society, neutral-occupation among the people and harmony of persistent in collective life. He teaches self-discipline, humanism, control of materialistic needs.

He wanted caste to perish away from India by initiating reforms that includes permitting untouchables to enter into Hindu temples, accelerating inter-dining, encouraging higher caste

to take up the occupation of the lower caste to get a experience about the agony of untouchables and to ensure forgetting inter caste differences and internalizing the humanistic values of Hinduism. The Hindus of India should stand integrated.

Gandhian approach to untouchability was no difference from SNDP movement in its ideology. Hence starting from reform movement, to Gandhi untouchability is considered as a culturo-historic mistake that can be addressed through reform, compassion, providing space for integration between higher castes a lower caste (untouchables).

Gandhian approach was contradicted by Harold Gould. He considers that socio-religious movement of the untouchables is not a search for equality with Brahminic and Sanskritic groups rather through this movement, untouchables of India manifested a protest indicating, that they can imbibe Brahmanic and Sanskritic values. So equality is not a grace for them neither a concession, rather it's a right earned by them. So reform is a form of protest and not a search for equality of status with Brahmins as a form of concession or grace.

According to dialectical approach to untouchability, in no society, economically empowered group ever subjected to social and cultural discrimination. It is a matter of facts that untouchables of India were the original inhabitants of the country. They were subjected to territorial and political aggression at different points of time, leading to loss of land and further leading to loss of livelihood. So controlling over land and agriculture, the dominant class pushed untouchables into the village-outskirts, imposed a ban on untouchables like ban on planting tree, milking cow, practicing agriculture etc. This led to pathetic condition for untouchables.

- According to this approach, poverty was the prime cause of exclusion of the untouchables of India. This was further supplemented by a new ideology offering a cultural justification to untouchability.

- David Hardiman considers that dalit movement in India is not different from mobilization of blacks in Europe. Both the movement is the manifestation of economic exploitation, giving rise to other forms of exploitation.

Contemporary approach to untouchability largely borrows ideas from **Ambedkar**. He considers that unto is not contextual practice intensity varies from one situation to another. Ambedkar's engagement with untouchability, as a researcher, intellectual and activist, is much more nuanced, hesitant but intimate as compared to his viewpoint on caste, where he is prepared to offer stronger judgements and proper solutions. However, with untouchability, there is often a failure of words. Grief is merged with anger. He often exclaims how an institution of this kind has been tolerated and even defended. He distinguished the institution of untouchability from that of caste, though the former is reinforced by the latter, and Brahmanism constituted the enemy of both. He felt that it was difficult for outsiders to understand the phenomena. He thought human sympathy would be forthcoming towards alleviating the plight of the untouchables, but at the same time anticipated hurdles to be crossed – hurdles made of age-old prejudices, interests, religious retribution, the untouchables could muster. He found that the colonial administration did little to ameliorate the lot of the untouchables. He argued that the track-record of Islam and Christianity, in this regard, is not praiseworthy either, although they may not subscribe to untouchability as integral to their religious beliefs.

Ambedkar felt that untouchables have to fight their own battle and if others are concerned about them, then, such a concern has to be expressed in helping them to fight rather than prescribing solutions to them. He discussed attempts to deny the existence of untouchables and to reduce the proportion of their population in order to deny them adequate political presence. He resorted to comparison with what he called the parallel cases, such as the treatment meted out to slaves and Jews but found the lot of the untouchables worse

than theirs. He argued that in spite of differences and cleavages, all untouchables share common disadvantages and treatment from caste Hindus: they live in ghettos; they were universally despised and kept outside the fold. He maintained a graphic account of the course of the movement of the untouchables, although this was much more specific about the movement in the Bombay Presidency.

He threw scorn at the Gandhian attempt to remove untouchability and termed it as a mere pretense aimed at buying over the untouchables with kindness. He presented voluminous empirical data to defend such a thesis, and suggested his own strategies to confront untouchability, warning untouchables not to fall into the trap of Gandhism. He exhorted them to fight for political power. Although he did not find the lot of untouchables better among Christians and Muslims, he felt that they had a better option as they did not subscribe to untouchability as a religious tenet. Ambedkar was also deeply sensitive to insinuations offered by others to co-opt untouchables within their political ambit.

Ambedkar rarely went into the origin of untouchability in history. He rebutted the suggestion that race has anything to do with it, and did not subscribe to the position that caste has its basis in race either. However, in one instance, he proposed a very imaginative thesis that untouchables were broken men living on the outskirts of village communities who, due to their refusal to give up Buddhism and beef-eating, came to be condemned as untouchables. He did not repeat this thesis in any central way later to the fold either. It has to be noted that the thesis was proposed when Ambedkar was fighting for the recognition of untouchables. He thought that untouchables were separate element in India and, therefore, should be constitutionally evolved with appropriate safeguards.

FUTURE PROSPECT

The big question is: will dalits ever be integrated in the main stream of the society? The age-long

bondage shackles may be shaken off when the dalits equip themselves with education and skills and effectively compete in modern society. Legislation alone will not do away with their disabilities. Along with dalits own effort for achieving resources, change in the attitudes of the caste Hindus is equally important for banishing untouchability. We agree with Sachchidananda who holds that the combination of factors like ameliorative efforts of the government, the growing consciousness of the dalits and the liberal attitudes of caste Hindus will diminish the disabilities and discriminations with the passage of time.

Politically, dalits are becoming conscious of the fact that they have to take advantage of their vast numbers in political terms. They may not be united to form a separate political party but by supporting the dominant national political parties they may extract the price of their support. But the problem is that though the educated dalits show evidence of politicians, the masses are not very much touched by this process. The elite have moved from the politics of compliance and affirmation to the politics of pressure and protest but they are still not able to present a common front and adopt radical posture.

