

Course Name- B.A.L.L.B IVth Sem.

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Topic- Indian Cast System

Caste-System in India

Meaning of Caste-System:

The most important feature of our social organisation was the existence of the caste system. A caste may be defined as a “collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with a specific occupation; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human and divine; professing to follow the same calling and forming a single homogeneous community.”

Under the caste system, the Hindu society was divided into four groups. Most texts place the Brahmins highest in the order, being the priesthood caste. Then came the Kshatriyas (the warrior caste), the vaishayas (merchants) and finally the Sudras (Servant Class). There were some castes which were not included in the four groupings and were called ‘out-castes.’

These four groups split themselves into an immense number of sub-groups which can be divided into three main types, the functional, the racial and the sectarian. Instances of the functional castes are the Brahmins or the priestly caste, the trading and Bania Castes which include among others, the Aggarwal and the Oswal of Rajasthan and the Chamar and Muchis who work in leather.

The Racial Castes are numerous in all parts of India such as the Mahar in Maharashtra, Gujjar and Meo in the Punjab and Haryana and Rajbansi in Bengal. The sectarian castes originated from sectarian sects such as the Lingayat caste in Mysore and Maharashtra.

The conduct of members of each caste and sub caste was restricted by an elaborate code of caste-rules. They were, for instance, prohibited from inter-marrying and commonly also from inter dining with members of other groups, especially those supposed to be inferior in status.

Birth, thus, determined irrevocably the whole course of a man’s social and domestic relations and he had, throughout life, to eat, drink, dress,

marry, and give in marriage in accordance with the usages into which he was born.

Dr. Ghurye mentions the following salient features of the caste system in India:

- (a) Division of Society into segments or parts.
- (b) Hierarchy.
- (c) Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse.
- (d) Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections.
- (e) Lack of choice of occupation.
- (f) Restriction on marriage.

Whatever the origin of the caste system, whether, as James Mill holds, it originated as simple division of labour, or as Risley propounds it was the result of the coming of the Aryans, who relegated the conquered race to an inferior position, the system had certain advantages in the earlier period.

Merits of Caste-System:

- (1) It enabled the society to secure the benefits of division of labour, as each caste specialised in one particular occupation. This made for economic strength and efficiency.
- (2) Under this system, the son acquired the secrets of the family occupation and also proficiency with the minimum efforts under the stern but affectionate eye of the father.
- (3) These castes resembled the ancient guilds of Europe in so far as they served the purpose of mutual benefit Societies for their members by providing courts of arbitration to settle disputes, by promoting good feeling among the members, by regulating wages and profits of their members and helping them occasionally in distress.

(4) The system also settled the career and occupation of a person and thus saved him the worry of employment.

(5) It also protected a member from the **“Canker of social jealousy and unfulfilled aspirations.”**

In short, the caste served the Hindu as “his club, his trade union, his benefit society, and his Philanthropic society.” These benefits were, however, enjoyed only when the system had not assumed the rigid form it took later. In its later form, the system was associated with several evils and, therefore, deserved unqualified denunciation for acting as a drag on economic progress.

Demerits of Caste-System:

1. One of the serious disadvantages of the caste system was that it prevented close correspondence between inborn capacity and industrial function which is such a fundamental necessity for economic progress. A great harm was done to economic activity by putting men into water-tight compartments on the mere accident of birth irrespective of their temperament and qualifications.

2. The system led to the formation of strong but rigid non-competing groups thereby leading to overcrowding of certain occupations and an undue advantage being given to others.

3. The caste-system impeded the progress of large-scale enterprise in various ways:

(a) It checked mobility of labour there by making it difficult to bring about speedy adjustment between demand for and supply of particular kind of labour.

(b) Under this system, as the artisan used his own capital, immobility of labour meant immobility of capital as well thereby making it difficult to allow working capacity to be fully used.

(c) The system militated against the minute sub-division of labour so characteristic of modern large-scale production,

(d) The system made it impossible to bring together intellect, manual labour and capital which were often isolated from each other, forming separate castes.

(e) Consumption became localised as every caste differed in its food, clothing and utensils. A large variety of commodities had to be produced, although each on a small scale.

(f) It led to much wastage of labour by preventing co-operation between members of different castes. S.C. Dube says that if the farmer was not satisfied with the work of the crafts man, the difficulty was not in dismissing him but in finding a substitute because no one was willing to act as a substitute for fear of being penalized by the caste panchayat.

(g) Yet another disadvantages was that this system of each caste and sub-caste keeping 'itself to itself' prevented India, despite her relatively high stage of economic development, from adopting the technical changes introduced in the west.

(h) The system produced among higher castes a disinclination towards certain occupations associated with lower castes and prevented a high caste man from improving his economic position. M. L. Darling cites, in this connection, the example of the Rajput who, by common consent, was the worst cultivator in the Punjab. If he was a pure Rajput, he was forbidden to touch the plough.

(i) Another negative consequence of the system was derived from the fact that the most highly-placed castes were, by tradition, inactive and did no physical work. The prestige of these classes was great and, therefore, other classes also tended to look upon work in general and physical in particular, as a lower form of activity.

(j) The system, was a negation of the principle of equality. Dumont calls it **"institutionalised inequality."** It bred in the higher castes false sense of superiority and, in the lower, an attitude fatal to their sense of self-respect.

In this atmosphere, the untouchable was a constant loser in ordinary commercial operations through his inability to enter a shop or even to pass through streets where shopkeepers dwelled. Such social

discrimination naturally constituted a most serious obstacle to 'manliness, independence, and capacity towards self-help.'

(k) One of the most important points is that the social status of an individual was essentially hereditary. He could not change it by his own effort or ability—what personal respect he could earn was won by accepting the rules of his caste and the conditions to which he was destined at birth.

As Mayer has noted, anyone, who tried to improve his social position, faced the hostility of public opinion and even violent reactions from members of 'castes' higher than his own. The fundamental charge that can be brought against the system is that it became a convenient tool in the hands of the upper caste leadership for the preservation of its special privileges.

It thus served as an instrument of exploitation of a large mass of society. And it is quite likely that the reaction and revolt against this glaringly inequitable system was prevented by the Brahmins by creating a wide-spread myth about their own holiness infallibility, by the mythological explanation of the origin of the system and by a belief in the Law of Karma and the Transmigration of soul.

Decline of Caste System:

The caste system in the mid 1960's was no longer as rigid as before. The influence of western thought and education, introduction of modern means of transport and the establishment of modern courts, all tended, to loosen the grip of caste barriers.

The exigencies of railway travel-led to the relaxation of certain taboos on food, drink, and personal contact—a process further helped by western education with its leveling tendencies.

The linking up of the village with the outside world and the growth of trade and modern industry led an increasing number of men to give up

their traditional occupations and seek employment in new mills, mines and workshops.

The University and college life where the low caste student rubs shoulders with the one of high caste, and the spirit of scepticism which the education encouraged, also helped in undermining the spirit of caste exclusion. The process was further helped by increasing urbanisation which slowly but surely destroyed certain caste restrictions.

The trams, the buses, the Cinemas cater for all those who have money to pay irrespective of their castes. The street hydrants are used by Hindus and Muslims alike and **“the attractions of Football have triumphed over the prejudice against leather.”**

The Judicial system in India may also be included among the factors which brought about the weakening of the caste rigidity. The law, administered without any distinction of the high and the low, refused to recognise the self-constituted courts of the castes.

Mention may also be made of the influence of the introduction of money economy. As long as the traditional system of demand and counter-demand existed, it was very difficult for a person to change his type of work. The community expected him to contribute a particular form of labour in return for his traditional reward in kind.

The transition from the barter system to one of monetary exchange gave members of a caste not only freedom from traditional requirements, but also permitted a change in technique because it now became possible to buy new production tools. Nothing now forbade members of a caste from doing a work different from their traditional activity.

The Partition of the country and, in particular, the massive exodus of Hindus from Pakistan into India, caused unprecedented over-crowding in certain areas. Uprooted from their hearths and homes, reduced to a desperate condition, the refugees, irrespective of their castes, were willing to accept any employment even if it implied a drastic change in their social status.

The Philanthropic agencies like the Arya Samaj and missionary societies also played no mean part in the uplift of the untouchables. The real

credit, however, goes to Gandhiji for organising the movement for the advancement of Harijans, by showing his readiness to fast unto death first in 1932 and again in 1933.

As a result of these fasts and the constructive and educational work done under his inspiration, the Harijans were admitted to temples at a number of places in British India and Travancore.

Other states issued proclamations throwing temples open to all castes. Under his inspiration, untouchability was abolished under the new Republican constitution of India and the discriminatory treatment on grounds of caste, creed or sex was declared ultravires of the constitution.

There is no doubt that all these factors greatly undermined, the rigidities of the caste system. People no longer felt compelled to follow their traditional caste occupation. Examples of Brahmins filling very different posts of money lenders, merchants and soldiers were as commonly found as those of scheduled castes working as teachers, administrators and factory workers.

Present Position of Caste System:

Inter personal relations between members of various castes have changed for the better. Inter-caste marriage, though not frequent as yet, is becoming increasingly common. The gulf that separated the Harijans from the rest of the society has also narrowed.

And yet, even when the system seems to be disintegrating, its core has undergone very little change. The higher castes, possessing either money or education or both, often take the lead in the new commercial, administrative and industrial institutions that have come up in the planning era.

Thus, those placed by tradition high in the order of castes, are still often at the top of the scale and the old degrees of caste prestige have been replaced by an equivalent degree of economic and social power.

Attempts by Harijans to exercise the rights given to them by the Constitution have often led to violent attacks on them by the dominant castes. They are beaten up and their huts often burned down. In addition, they are subjected to economic boycott.

A significant development in the Post-Independence period is the emergence of caste as a political force. In urban life, it has given rise to new institutions, associations and federations based on membership of the caste and formed with the object of promoting Caste interests.

One of the consequences of this situation is that, in many States, politics has become predominantly caste-politics. When candidates are being picked, caste-appeal becomes one of the first considerations; when policies are framed, the likely reactions of dominant castes are carefully assessed.

Caste-brothers are supported as fully as is possible and in the distribution of the Jobs, contracts, and State-aid to agriculture, a nice balance is maintained between the more important castes.

Thus we find that the caste weakened only as a social force but it has acquired a unique significance as a political force. What is dying is caste-hierarchy, the acceptance of superior or inferior status with concomitant social obligations and restrictions. On the other hand, what is growing is 'Casteism' or the individual's dependence on his caste for social and economic advancement.

Criticism and even legislation proved powerless to change a system so solidly rooted in Indian life. Only economic development, the penetration of monetary economy into the villages, and a change in the agrarian structure would alter the traditional identification between 'dominant castes' and 'lower castes' and only then would education be extended to all, industrialisation succeed and the caste system dissolve.

Differences between Class and Caste Systems

Differences between Class and Caste Systems!

In Max Weber's phraseology, caste and class are both status groups. While castes are perceived as hereditary groups with a fixed ritual status, social classes are defined in terms of the relations of production. A social class is a category of people who have a similar socio-economic status in relation to other classes in the society. The individuals and families which are classified as part of the same social class have similar life chances, prestige, style of life, attitudes etc.

In the caste system, status of a caste is determined not by the economic and the political privileges but by the ritualistic legitimation of authority. In the class system, ritual norms have no importance at all but power and wealth alone determine one's status (Dumont, 1958).

Class system differs in many respects from other forms of stratification—slavery, estate and caste system. In earlier textbooks such as written by MacIver, Davis and Bottomore, it was observed that caste and class are polar opposites. They are antithetical to each other. While 'class' represents a 'democratic society' having equality of opportunity, 'caste' is obverse of it.

Following are the main differences between class and caste systems:

1. Castes are found in Indian sub-continent only, especially in India, while classes are found almost everywhere. Classes are especially the characteristic of industrial societies of Europe and America. According to Dumont and Leach, caste is a unique phenomenon found only in India.
2. Classes depend mainly on economic differences between groupings of individuals—inequalities in possession and control of material resources—whereas in caste system non-economic factors such as influence of religion [theory of karma, rebirth and ritual (purity-pollution)] are most important.
3. Unlike castes or other types of strata, classes are not established by legal or religious provisions; membership is not based on inherited position as specified either legally or by custom. On the other hand, the membership is inherited in the caste system.
4. Class system is typically more fluid than the caste system or the other types of stratification and the boundaries between classes are never clear-cut. Caste system is static whereas the class system is dynamic.
5. In the class system, there are no formal restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage between people from different classes as is found in the caste system. Endogamy is the essence of caste system which is perpetuating it.
6. Social classes are based on the principle of achievement, i.e., on one's own efforts, not simply given at birth as is common in the caste system and other types of stratification system. As such social mobility

(movement upwards and downwards) is much more common in the class structure than in the caste system or in other types. In the caste system, individual mobility from one caste to another is impossible

This is why, castes are known as closed classes (D.N. Majumdar). It is a closed system of stratification in which almost all sons end up in precisely the same stratum their fathers occupied. The system of stratification in which there is high rate of upward mobility, such as that in the Britain and United States is known as open class system. The view that castes are closed classes is not accepted by M.N. Srinivas (1962) and Andre Beteille (1965).

7. In the caste system and in other types of stratification system, inequalities are expressed primarily in personal relationships of duty or obligation—between lower- and higher-caste individuals, between serf and lord, between slave and master. On the other hand, the nature of class system is impersonal. Class system operates mainly through large-scale connections of an impersonal kind.

8. Caste system is characterised by ‘cumulative inequality’ but class system is characterised by ‘dispersed inequality.’

9. Caste system is an organic system but class has a segmentary character where various segments are motivated by competition (Leach, 1960).

10. Caste works as an active political force in a village (Beteille, 1966) but class does not work