

GS Ghurye on Caste system

Ghurye's understanding of caste is comparative, historical and Indological as well. Unlike his contemporaries he doesn't glorify or condemn caste, rather he considers caste as a product of Indian culture, changing with the passage of time. Hence, it is a subject of sociological interest. In his book "Caste and Race in India", he agrees with Sir Herbert Risley that caste is a product of race that comes to India along with Aryans. Ghurye considers it as unfortunate that the caste system is mostly understood in terms of Brahminic domination. Caste has gone through the process of fusion and fission in different ways in Indian history. During the Vedic period caste was a product of race. Ghurye points out that caste was considered as central to an organized form of division of labour in Aryan society.

Ghurye explains caste in India on the basis of six distinctive characteristics:

Segmental division of society;

Hierarchy;

Civil and religious disabilities and privileges;

Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation;

Restriction on food, drinks and social intercourse;

Endogamy.

Segmental division of the society:

Segment is the compartmentalization of the population into groups. It is basically horizontal in character. It generates social grouping but not labelling. The membership is ascribed in character, i.e. it is based on birth and flows from generation to generation. Based on the membership every member has fixed status, roles and tasks. According to the roles assigned they have to perform it. There are moral ethics, obligations and justification value behind these roles.

Hierarchy:

It is the second major characteristic of caste through which Hindu social organization and Indian Society penetrates. After the segmental divisions of the society, they are put in a pyramidal structure then it is called a hierarchy. Certain cultural principles like purity and pollution, prioritization of certain groups, preferences of the society, determine the positioning of the social segments in the hierarchy in layer. The layering of the segments is basically vertical in nature. This caste hierarchy is responsible for spelling out the access and prevention of caste and it becomes the primary consideration for role allocation, responsibility sharing and the imposition of restrictive

rules. Hierarchy determines caste norms. According to Ghurye hierarchy becomes the major consideration for deciding all these aforesaid variables. It basically implies the Division of Labour.

The entire gamut of activities in the society is divided into four types like

Religious,

Governance,

Maintenance and

Menial.

Among all these religious activities are given the highest position in society. Therefore Brahmins are given this responsibility. The second major activity is governance, which implies for managing the state craft and defending the populace from external aggression. So it is accorded to Khatriyas. The managerial activities are fixed on Vaishyas, who have to generate sustenance for the society. And the menial activities though an integral part of the society, are given the least priority and accorded to the Shudras.

Civil and religious disabilities:

Civil and religious disabilities expressed the rigidity of the caste system. To Ghurye the general reflection of Hindu social life was observed and felt through such disabilities. The disabilities were common to caste in different parts of the country but the caste groups included in it were not common, rather there are variations. Civil and religious disabilities basically came from the concept of purity and pollution. Disabilities were for impure and polluted caste and privileges were for pure/higher castes.

Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation:

The occupations have been fixed by heredity. Generally they have not been allowed to change their traditional occupations. Members of a caste maintain their supremacy and secrecy in their jobs and do not allow the other caste group to join in. The upper caste people like Brahmins are free to opt for study of religious books, while this cannot be done by other classes. The lower ranking activities like sweeping bathrooms, washing clothes, scavenging etc have been kept in the untouchable category.

Restriction on food, drinks and social intercourse:

Some rules have been imposed upon all caste people. Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse are still prevalent in Indian society. There are two types of food i.e. Kachha (cooked) food and Pakka (raw) food upon which certain restrictions are imposed with regard to sharing, for example:

Caste groups from whom twice born caste people can accept Kachha food;

Caste group from whom twice born caste people can accept Pakka food;

Caste groups from whom twice born caste people can accept water but no food;

Caste groups from whom twice born caste people do not accept water or food and maintain distance.

Endogamy:

The Indian caste system is also polarized due to endogamy being determined primarily by Caste. People can marry within caste only. To disobey the caste rule is not only treated as a crime but is also condemned as a sin. The caste panchayat not only denounces inter-caste marriages but also imposes severe punishment upon those who break these rules.