

Features of Caste System

The word 'caste' is taken from the Spanish word "casta". It means "breed, race and a host of hereditary qualities. The Portuguese also used this word to denote the group of people in India known as "jati". The English word "caste" a variant from the original word. The Sanskrit word for caste is "varna" which means colo+ur.

The caste system is unique to Indian society. It seeks its origin in the "Chaturvarna" system, according to which Hindu society was divided into four main varnas namely, the Brahmins, the Kshatriya, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. This Varna system was mainly based on the division of labour and occupation. The present caste system may degenerate from the earlier varna model. However, Varnas and Castes are not one and the same thing.

Various definitions have been put forward for the term caste.

(1) Herbert Ristey: "Caste is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community."

(2) C.H. Cooley: "When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary. We may call it a caste."

(3) Green: "Caste is a system of stratification in which mobility up and down the status ladder at least ideally may not occur."

(5) Anderson and Parkar: "Caste is that extreme form of social class organization in which the position of individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth."

Thus we see that the concept of caste is variously defined. However, Ghurye maintains that there is no general definition of caste. In the 3rd century B.C. the Greek traveller Megasthenes highlighted two elements of caste system, namely, (i) there is no

intermarriage and (ii) there can be no change of profession. These two factors throw some light on the concept of caste.

Features of caste system:

(1) Segmental Division of Society: The Hindu Society is divided into various castes. The membership of which is by birth. The status of an individual depends on the ritual purity of his caste. Caste is hereditary. Caste status is immutable. There are regular caste councils to regulate and control the behaviour of its members. The governing body of the caste is called Panchayat which takes cognizance of the offences against the caste taboos pertaining to commensality, marriage etc. It used to decide civil and criminal cases during the British regime. According to Maclver, caste is its own ruler. It is a small and complete social world in itself, a quasi sovereign body, all inclusive and marked off from one another and yet subsisting within the larger and wider society. Individual's first allegiance is to the caste rather than to the community.

(2) Social and Religious Hierarchy: The caste has a definite scheme of social precedence. The whole society is divided into distinct classes placed high and low in a hierarchy. Thus the Brahmins are placed at the top of the hierarchy and are considered as pure and superior whereas the shudras are placed at the lowest position and are considered as untouchables. They are subjected to varieties of disabilities. Such a social status is taken for granted. Nobody questions the privileges attached to and denied to these social positions.

(3) Restrictions on Food Habits and Social Relations: Caste displays some commensal taboos pertaining to sharing of food with other caste fellows in order to preserve their caste purity. Each caste develops its own sub-culture. There are restrictions with respect to food sharing and social intercourse. Minute rules are laid down with regard to the types of food which can be accepted and from whom. For example; a Brahmin will accept "pakka food" i.e., food prepared in clarified butter from other community, but he cannot accept "Kachcha" food from any other caste.

The ideology of pollution which is communicated by some castes to the higher caste people put severe restrictions on the level of intercourse. A touch of the lower caste man would pollute or defile a higher caste man. Even the shadow of the untouchables is considered defiling. In Kerala a Nair may approach a Nambudari Brahmin but must not

touch him. Moreover, a Tiyan was expected to keep himself at a distance of 36 steps from the Brahmins and a Pulayan at a distance of 96 paces. Even the wells are considered to be polluting if a low caste fellow draces water from the well. Such restrictions on social intercourse resulted in the practice of untouchability.

(4) Endogamy: A man borns and dies in the caste. One cannot change his caste. Every caste is further divided into sub castes. Each sub-castes is endogamous. The practice of endogamy is so rigid that it may be taken as the essence of the caste system. However we find the exception in the form of hypergamy. Apart from hypergamy, only endogamy prevails and a breach of this rule results in ostracism.

(5) Restricted choice of occupation: Every caste is characterised by its occupation. Members are expected to follow the caste occupation. It is hereditary. It is considered immoral to give up one's traditional occupation. No caste would allow its members to take any occupation which was either degrading or impure. For example; any one who is not born as a Brahmin cannot take up the profession of a priest. However, in the modern times this scene is changing with people practising professions other than their caste occupations especially in the urban scenario.

(6) Civil and Religious Disabilities: In the caste hierarchy upper caste people enjoyed certain privileges and lower caste people suffered from certain disabilities. In general the impure caste people are forced to live on the outskirts of the city. In Southern India certain parts of the town or village was inaccessible for some lower caste people. All over India the untouchables were not permitted to draw water from wells used by the upper castes people. The public schools did not admit impure castes like Chamars and Mahars. The untouchables were not permitted to enter into the temples. A Brahmin could not be punished with capital punishment. In case of imprisonment Brahmins were given a liberal treatment than the other classes.