

SANSKRITIZATION

Sanskritization is the mobility observed within the framework of the caste where the lower caste has often tried to claim higher status by imitating the lifestyles of the upper caste, particularly of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The term “Sanskritization” was introduced into Indian society by Prof. M.N. Srinivas. The term refers to a process whereby people of lower castes collectively tried to adopt upper caste practices and beliefs, as a preliminary step to acquire higher status. Thus, Sanskritization indicates a process of cultural mobility that is taking place in the traditional social system of India.

M.N. Srinivas in his study of Coorg in Karnataka found that lower castes, in order to raise their position in the caste hierarchy, adopted some customs and practices of the Brahmins, and gave up some of their own which were considered to be “impure” by the higher castes. For example, they gave up meat-eating, drinking liquor and animal sacrifice to their deities. They imitated Brahmins in matters of dress, food and rituals. By doing this, within a generation or so they could claim higher positions in the hierarchy of castes.

The initial definition of Sanskritization as given by M.N. Srinivas is “the process of mobility of lower castes by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism to move in the caste hierarchy in a generation or two”. But his second definition is redefined as “a process by which a low caste or a tribe or other group changes to customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice-born castes.”

Through the process of Sanskritization, it would reveal to us the following facts –

“Sanskritization” denotes the process of upward mobility where a caste tries to increase its position in the caste hierarchy not at once, but over a period of an item which sometimes takes a period of one or two generations.

Sanskritization denotes the process in which the lower caste tries to imitate the lifestyle of the upper caste in their attempt to raise their social status. The process seems to be associated with the role of the local ‘dominant caste’.

M.N. Srinivas says Sanskritization is not a new phenomenon and has been a major process of cultural change in Indian history, and it has occurred in every part of the Indian sub-continent. It may have been more active at some period than others and some parts of India are more Sanskritized than others, but there is no doubt that the process has been universal.

Sanskritization is not necessarily confined to the caste within the Hindu community, it is found in tribal communities also. The Bhils of Western India, the Gonds and Oroans of Central India and the Paharis of the Himalayan region have all come under the influence of Sanskritization. These tribal communities are now claiming themselves to be Hindus for their communities represents some caste groups within the fold of Hinduism.

The process of Sanskritization serves as a 'reference group'. It is through this process, a caste group tries to orient its belief, practices, values, attitudes and "life styles" in terms of another superior or dominant group so that it can also get some recognition.

The process of Sanskritization does not automatically result in the achievement of a higher status of the group people will have to wait for a period of a generation or two before their claim can be accepted.

The British rules in India provide a favourable atmosphere for Sanskritization to take place. Political independence has weakened the trends towards this change, such that the emphasis now is on vertical social mobility and not on horizontal mobility and in this process of mobility the basic unit remains the group and not the individual or family

Sanskritization has often been construed as a kind of protest against the traditional caste system. It is a type of protest against the caste system in which the status is pre-determined. Making an attempt through Sanskritization to move up in the caste hierarchy setting aside the hierarchical principle of caste which amounts to a protest against the caste system itself.

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

FACTORS PROMOTING OR FACILITATING SANSKRITISATION

Factors that have made Sanskritisation possible are industrialisation, occupational mobility, developed communication, the spread of literacy, and western technology. 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 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. The political institution of parliamentary democracy has also contributed to the increased Sanskritisation, according to Srinivas. Prohibition, a Sanskritic value, has been mentioned in the Constitution of India. Some states have introduced it wholly or partially.