
UNIT 17 THE BASIS OF CASTE HIERARCHY: PURITY AND POLLUTION

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have read through and studied this unit you will be able to :

- Describe features of the caste system;
- Discuss the basis of caste hierarchy;
- Outline the notions of purity and pollution; and
- Become acquainted with Dumont's theory of caste.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste has for long been viewed as a distinctive feature of the Indian society. It is not merely an institution that characterizes the structure of social stratification in India. "Caste" has often been seen to represent the core of India. It has been viewed both as an institution as well as an ideology. Institutionally, "caste" provided a framework for arranging and organizing social groups in terms of their statuses and positions in the social and economic system. It fixed individuals into the structure of social hierarchy on the basis of their birth. As an ideology, caste was a system of values and ideas that legitimized and reinforced the existing structure of social inequality. It also provided a worldview around which a typical Hindu organized his/her life.

Apart from being an institution that distinguished India from other societies, caste was also an epitome of the traditional society, a "closed system", where generation after generation individuals did similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of

lives. In contrast, the modern industrial societies of the West were projected a "open systems" of social stratification, societies based on class, where individuals could choose their occupations according to their abilities and tastes. If they worked for it, in such open systems of stratification, they could move up in the social hierarchy and change their class position. Such mobility at the individual level was impossible in the caste system. Caste has been seen an extreme form of social stratification.

17.1.1 Features of Caste System

G.S Ghurye, a famous sociologist, identified six different features of the Hindu caste system.

- i) **Segmental division of society:** Castes were groups with well-developed life-styles of their own. The membership of the groups was determined by birth and not by choice. The status of a person depended not on the amount of wealth he possessed but on the rank that his caste enjoyed in the Hindu society.
- ii) **Hierarchy:** There was definite scheme of social precedence amongst castes. Each group was given a specific status in the overall framework of hierarchy.
- iii) **Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse:** There were minute rules as to what sort of food or drink could be accepted by a person and from what caste.
- iv) **Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections:** Segregation of individual castes or groups of castes in the village was the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities. Certain sacraments could not be performed by any caste other than the Brahmins. Similarly, shudras and other lower castes were not allowed to read or learn the sacred scriptures.
- v) **Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation:** Generally each caste considered a particular occupation as its legitimate calling. To abandon the hereditary occupation in pursuit of another, even it was more lucrative, was not considered right.
- vi) **Restrictions on marriage:** Caste groups observed strict endogamy. Members of a caste group married only within their castes. However, there were a few exceptions. In some regions of India, the upper caste man could marry a lower caste woman. This kind of marriage alliance is known as hypergamy.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) List out the features of the caste system. Use about six lines for your answer.

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- 2) Write a note on jatis. Use about five lines for your answer.

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Foundation Stone of a Schedule Caste Village

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

Interestingly, the term “caste” is not of Indian origin. Its origin has been located in the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning ‘race’ or ‘pure stock’. Also it was outsiders, those who came from the West, who first used the term “caste” to make sense of the social organization of the Indian society. It is currently used as a general term that refers to two different systems of social relations, viz. *Varna* and *Jati*. The *varna* system is a broad framework that applies, more or less, to the entire country. The *varnas* are only four in number, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (these is also a fifth category of the “untouchables”, who are considered to be outside the *varna* system and are ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy).

Activity 1

What do you feel are the most important features of the caste system. Note them down and discuss with other people and also with students at the study centre.

17.1.2 The Jatis

The *Jatis*, concrete social groupings of people, differ considerably from region to region. Each linguistic region has a large number of *Jatis*. According to one estimate, there are two to three hundred *jatis* in each linguistic region of India. *Jatis* are relatively small endogamous groups with a distinctive style of life and a specific traditional occupation. Each *Jati* has a name and tends to locate its status by referring to the *varna* scheme of hierarchy. The different *jatis* in a region were arranged in a vertical order. However, unlike the *varna* scheme, the mutual position of *jatis* has been less clear and subject to contestations. Many *jatis* have claimed higher status than assigned to them by others. This ambiguity has been observed particularly in the middle level caste groupings.

There were also cases of upward mobility in the caste system. A lower caste could change its position in the caste hierarchy and move upward by adopting the style of life of a higher caste. M.N. Srinivas, the famous Indian sociologist, called this process ‘Sanskritisation’. However, as has been pointed out by Andre Beteille, it was not merely by adopting the rituals and life style of the upper castes that lower caste could move upwards. Such a process was invariably accompanied by some real improvement in the material condition of a group. However, those who Sanskritised their style of life did not

question the system of caste hierarchy or its ideology. They merely tried to change their position in the system. While individual castes moved up or down, the structure remained the same.

17.2 THE BASIS OF CASTE HIERARCHY

Sociologists and social anthropologists have carried out large numbers of studies on the system of caste hierarchy. Along with defining the system and identifying its features, they have also offered theories that explain the caste system. The process of explanation involves finding answers to questions such as 'why the system of caste hierarchy developed and has survived for such a long time in India? Or 'what is at the base of caste hierarchy?' Different scholars have explained the phenomenon of caste differently. While some locate the origin of the caste system in racial wars, other explain it in economic terms. Still others have explained it by referring to the specific cultural values of the Hindu/Indian society.

17.2.1 Caste and Race

The connection between caste and race was made by some of the earliest foreign commentators on India. They related it to the so-called Aryan invasion of India. They argued that while upper caste Hindus were of "foreign" or Aryan origin, the lower castes belonged to the "native" or "aboriginal" races. Being the conquerors, the Aryans assigned themselves the status of upper castes and those who were conquered were made subjects by the dominant Aryans and were given the status of lower castes. The fact that members of upper castes had fairer skin than the lower castes was cited as a testimony in support of such a hypothesis. However, this theory has been rejected for being purely speculative in nature. There is very little hard evidence to support such an argument. Further, it has been argued that those from the lower castes had darker skin not because they necessarily belonged to a different racial stock but because they were the ones who did much of the physical work in the fields in the open. Moreover, even if it was true that the Aryans came from outside and subjugated the native population, it does not automatically explain the complex reality of caste distinctions and hierarchy. Why did such an elaborate scheme of hierarchy was developed? Why did such a scenario did not give rise to class type of inequality?

17.2.2 Caste and Occupation

Those who look at caste in economic terms generally do so by referring to obvious fact of the relationship between caste and occupation. Caste, they argue, was a kind of division of labour, different groups specializing in different occupations. Some others see it as a specific form of pre-capitalist/feudal separated from each other in certain respects (caste endogamy, restrictions on eating together and on physical contact), but interdependent in other (traditional division of labour). The word 'caste', not only involved hereditary specialization of occupations but also differential rights. Different occupations were arranged in a hierarchical order that made their occupants socially unequal. Inequality was an essential feature of the caste system. Along with inequality, he also underlined the element of pollution as an important feature of caste. Different groups, in a caste society, tend to 'repel each other rather than attract, each retires within itself, isolates itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relation with neighboring groups'. Thus Bogue identified three core features of caste system, viz., hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion. Similarly, an Indian scholar, S.V. Ketkar, in his book on the *History of Caste in India*, published in 1909, had emphasized on the notion of purity and pollution being the chief principle on which the system was based.

17.3 PURITY AND POLLUTION

As mentioned above, the theory of caste hierarchy that locates its basis in the notion of purity and pollution is generally associated with the writings of the French sociologist Louis Dumont. He has offered a detailed account of his theory in his well-known book, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Dumont has developed a general theory, an "ideal type", of the traditional Hindu caste system. Though he used

ethnographic material (field-work based accounts of the way caste system is practiced) in support of his arguments, his main sources were Indological, the classical Hindu texts. He approached the Hindu caste system from a structuralist perspective that focused on the underlying structure of ideas of a given system. These “essential principles” constitute the logic of a system and may not be apparently visible in its everyday practice. His objective was to develop a pure model that would provide a general explanation of the system.

Box 17.01

Dumont is critical of those who tried to explain caste in terms of politico-economic factors where caste was seen as a system of domination and exploitation. He, for example, criticizes F.G. Bailey, who in his book on ‘Caste and the Economic Frontier’ (based on his field work in Orissa), has argued that there was a high degree of coincidence between politico-economic ranks and the ritual ranking of caste. This is a reflection of the general rule that those who achieve wealth and political power tend to rise in the ritual scheme of ranking. It is what is meant by saying that the ranking system of caste groups was validated by differential control over the productive resources of the village.

Dumont disagreed with Bailey and others who made such theoretical claims because they, according to him, failed to appreciate the peculiarity of the Indian society. These scholars, Dumont argues, tended to look for parallels of the Western society in India, viz., class type social organization. He insists that India and the traditional societies in general were fundamentally different from the Western society. Their social structures needed to be explained with different sets of concepts. Dumont shows how Bailey could not explain as to why the Brahmins were placed at the top of the caste hierarchy. Bailey had recognized the fact that the correlation between power and ritual status did not work at the two extremes of the caste ladder, i.e. in case of the Brahmins (at the top of the caste hierarchy) and the untouchables (at the bottom of the caste hierarchy). Dumont argues that this was not an anomaly but a crucial fact about the caste system.

He suggests that the Hindu caste system needed to be look-at as a system that was an opposite of the West. While the West was a modern society based on individualism, India was a traditional society. The social structures of traditional societies functioned on very different principles and could be understood only in “totality”. It was only through this framework of “totality” or “holism” that a proper theory of caste could be developed.

17.3.1 Modern and Traditional Societies

Unlike the modern societies of the West, the Indian society, or for that matter, the traditional societies in general, were not bothered with maintaining equality of status among individuals. On the contrary, they were concerned with maintaining social differences and inequalities. The ideal of “totality” was more valued in a traditional society than that of the “individual”. Dumont argues that a proper explanation of caste could be worked out only by keeping these fundamental differences between the West and the Indian society in mind.

Caste, Dumont argues, was above all an ideology, ‘a system of ideas, beliefs and values’. It was in the ideological aspect of the caste system that one should look for the essential structure of the Hindu society. It was only via ideology that the essence of castes could be grasped and true principle behind the system could be known. Ideology for him was not a residual factor or part of superstructure, as the term is understood in the Marxist theory. In his framework, ideology was an autonomous sphere and could not be reduced to any other factor or treated secondary to politico-economic factor.

17.4 THE IDEA OF HIERARCHY

Ideology of the system is hierarchy. “The castes”, Dumont argues, “teach us a fundamental social principle, hierarchy”. Hierarchy was the essence of caste. Hierarchy was not merely another name for inequality or an extreme form of social stratification, but a totally different principle of social organization. His notion of hierarchy was almost the same as that of Bogle (as discussed above) who has explained caste by referring to three principles, viz., hierarchy, occupational specialization and mutual repulsion. Dumont

however argues that for a proper theoretical explanation of the system, it was important to identify one common element, 'a single true principle' to which the three features of the caste system suggested by Bougle could be reduced. It was only then that we would be able to uncover the structure of the caste system. Such a principle, Dumont suggests, was 'the opposition of the pure and the impure'.

Box 17.02

Hierarchy, defined as superiority of the pure over the impure, was the keystone in Dumont's model of the caste system. Dumont points out that this opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.

For Dumont, castes were not merely ranked hierarchically in a vertical order; they were also mutually related through a system of oppositions, a structure. It was this structure of the caste system that he wished to understand and explain through a study of the classical Hindu texts.

Activity 2

Define the notion of hierarchy and discuss it with other students at the study centre. Note down the main points of the discussion.

17.4.1 Status and Power

Another important aspect of the Hindu caste society in his theory is the specific relationship that exists between status and power. Unlike the modern/Western societies where power and status normally went together, in the caste system there was a divergence between the two. In a typical caste system, those who were the most powerful politically and economically did not necessarily enjoy the highest status in the society. Likewise, those who enjoyed the highest status (the Brahmins) could be economically poor and might have little political clout. The distinguishing feature of caste society was the status as a principle of social organization was superior to power. "Status encompasses power". Unlike the class society, in the caste system, power operated within the framework of status hierarchy.

17.4.2 Dumont's Theory: A Summing Up

To sum up Dumont's theory, we can identify the following core points that he makes:

- The Hindu caste system could not be explained in terms of politico-economic factors. Caste was not just another form of class or an extreme form of stratification.
- It should be explained in terms of its underlying structure of ideas and values, i.e. the ideology.
- The nature of the value system (ideology) and the framework of social organization in the traditional societies were totally different from that of the modern societies of the West.
- The ideology of the Hindu caste system was that of hierarchy. The structure of hierarchy was explained in terms of the dialectical relationship (unity and opposition) between the "pure" and "impure". Pure was superior to the impure.
- One of the core features of the caste system was the distinction that it made between status and power. It was the ideology of hierarchy (that allocated status to different groups in society) that was more important than the material position of a person in the caste system. Priest, at least in principle, was superior to the king.

17.5 CRITICISMS OF DUMONT'S THEORY

Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus* has been widely acclaimed as the single most

important contribution to the study of the Hindu caste system. His explanation of caste in terms of "purity" and "pollution" has become a part of the common sense sociology. However, his theory has also been one of the most controversial pieces of work. He has been criticized on various grounds. Among those who have critically examined his thesis and questioned his explanation of caste include scholars like Gerald Berreman, Dipankar Gupta, Andre Beteille and Joan Mencher. They have all themselves been students of the Indian society and have found problems with Dumont's arguments at different levels, empirically, logically, and ideologically. Following are some of the common points that have been raised by different scholars against Dumont's work.

- i) **It does not correspond with the lived reality of caste:** It has been pointed out by his critiques that much of Dumont's theory has been derived from the study of some selective classical Hindu texts. He has ignored the large amount of empirical literature that was available to him, produced by professional social anthropologists in form of village studies and monographs. These monographs provided graphic details of the ways in which caste system functioned at the micro-level. Their description of the system did not confirm his theory. Interestingly, as pointed by Gupta, even when Dumont was aware of the existence of these facts, he constructed them in a manner that their impact was marginalised. Though Dumont explicitly states that his attempt was to understand the underlying structure of the system and not the way caste was practiced in every day life, he nevertheless aspires to make generalizations that have empirical value. He wants us to believe that his theory truly explains the essence of caste.

Moreover, as Berreman rightly points out, caste did not exist except empirically, in the lives of people as they interacted with each other. 'The human meaning of caste for those who lived it was power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. As an anthropological document, a description of caste which failed to convey this was a travesty in the world today'.

Further, Dumont has tried to develop a theory of caste that was supposed to apply to the entire Indian subcontinent. However, at empirical level, there existed significant variations in the system of caste hierarchy from region to region. While there were some regions of India where Brahmins had indeed been considered the superior most, there were other regions where they did not command much respect, such as, in the north-western region of India.

- ii) **Status and power are not independent of each other:** Dumont's theory of caste stands on the premise that in the Indian society, the ritual hierarchy functioned independently of the considerations of power and wealth. This premise has been the most contentious issue among his critics. They find it simply not being applicable to the actual structure of social inequalities in the Indian context. Berreman has, for example, argued that the power-status opposition is a false dichotomy in the context of caste. The two, Berreman insists, went together everywhere and the Indian case was no exception. Power and status were two sides of the same coin. He cites the example of the integration of Gonds, a tribal group into the caste system. They were generally incorporated into the caste system as untouchables. However, in areas where they had retained power in the form of land, they were treated differently. In such cases they were given much higher status in the local caste hierarchy and were called Raj Gonds. Similarly, Gupta has pointed out that 'the rule of caste was obeyed when it was accompanied by the rule of power'.
- iii) **Dumont's theory represents a Brahmanical perspective on caste:** Dumont has been widely criticized for presenting a partial and a biased view of the system. Since his theory was largely derived from the classical Hindu texts, produced invariably by the upper caste Brahmins, his theory allegedly reflected the bias that the upper caste themselves had vis-à-vis the system. It may be worthwhile to quote once again from Berreman. He writes:

Dumont relies heavily on some classical Sanskrit texts while ignoring others, a technique that is inevitable with such sources, but which enables one to 'prove' almost anything one wishes. The result is that he conveys a view of caste which is artificial,

stiff, stereotypical and idealized. It is a view that confirms rather closely to the high-caste ideal of what the system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively.

Another scholar, Joan Mencher, who conducted her field-work among the lower castes in Tamil Nadu found that 'from the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste had functioned and continued to function as a very effective system of economic exploitation.

- iv) **Dumont works with a false dichotomy between the “traditional” and “modern” societies:** Dumont has also been criticized for treating Indian society as being fundamentally different from the West. He works with a much-criticized notion of a dichotomy between the modern societies of the West and the traditional societies of the Third World. His theory is based on the assumption that while the modern societies of the West were characterized by the ideas of individualism and egalitarianism, the traditional societies, in contrast, were characterized by conceptions of the collective nature of man, by the primacy of social rather than individual goals, and thus by hierarchy. As an implication of this, traditional societies like India get represented as knowing nothing about the values of equality and liberty. While traditional societies like India were projected as being closed and unchanging, the West was presented as being progressive and open.
- v) **Dumont’s theory gives no agency to the individuals who practice it:** Dumont’s notion of traditional society is such that it gave no recognition to the individual choice. According to Berreman : ‘The people who comprise the system were depicted as unfeeling, regimented automatons ruled by inexorable social forces, confirming unquestioningly and unerringly to universal values’. Such a notion of the “traditional” Indian society could be easily contradicted by the empirical studies carried out by professional social anthropologists. These studies showed that the Indian people were ‘as willful, factionalized and individually variable as people anywhere else’.
- vi) **Dumont does not acknowledge the social movements against the caste ideology:** Critics have also pointed out that the oppressive side of the caste system and the various oppositional movements against it are not ephiphenomenal to caste, as has been suggested by Dumont. There was a long list of social mobilizations against Brahminical dominance in modern as well as in the pre-modern India. From Buddhism to Bhakti to Sikhism to neo Buddhism, there had been strong, and to some extent successful opposition to the caste ideology. There was no place for such realities in Dumont’s depiction of the Indian society and in his theory of the caste system.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write a note on purity and pollution. Use about five lines for your answer

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2) Outline some of the criticisms of Dumont’s theory. Use about five lines for your answer.

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17.6 LET US SUM UP

Perhaps no other work on the nature of the traditional Indian society and the Hindu caste system has been so influential as the theory of 'purity and pollution' given by Louis Dumont. Despite its extensive criticism, his book continues to be a must reading for the students of Indian sociology and social anthropology. Though most of his have made valid points, they have not been able provide another theory like the one that Dumont offered. Given his assumptions and methods, he has been able to counter most of the criticisms leveled against his theory.

However, whatever may be the strength of Dumont's theory, it has very little value to in terms of understanding the contemporary context of caste system. The caste today works on very different lines. The political process unleashed by the introduction of democratic institutions and adult franchise has almost completely changed the grammar of the caste system today.

17.7 KEY WORDS

Hierarchy	: Ordering of society in a rank order from top to bottom, e.g. Caste System.
Pollution	: A state of mind and body which is connected with occupation and caste and regarded as unclean.
Purity	: A state of ritual cleanliness associated with caste occupation.

17.8 FURTHER READINGS

Chatterjee, S.M. and U. Sharma, ed., (1994), *Contextualising Caste*, Oxford, Blackwell Publisher.

Dumont, L. 1970, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, Delhi, Vikas.

17.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The features of the caste system are:
 - i) segmental division of society
 - ii) hierarchy
 - iii) Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse
 - iv) Religious disabilities and priveledges
 - v) Lack of choice of occupation
 - vi) Restrictions on marriage.
- 2) Jatis are actual groups of people and differ from region to region. Each linguistic region has two to three hundred jatis. They are small endogamous groups with a specific life-style. The jati locates its status by referring to the varna scheme. Unlike the varna scheme, jatis position in the hierarchy is not completely clear.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Dumont's entire theory of caste rests on the notion of purity and pollution. Dumont developed an 'ideal type' theory and approached the subject from the structuralist points of view and states that the position of a caste in the hierarchy rests on the ideology of purity and pollution of a caste.
- 2) Some of the criticisms of Dumont's theory include:
 - i) It is not lived reality
 - ii) Status and power are not independent each other
 - iii) It has a Brahmanical orientation
 - iv) The individual has no place in it.



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UNIT 18 DIMENSIONS OF CASTE: RITUALS AND POWER

Structure

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- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 The Divergent Meanings of Caste
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 - 18.3.1 Social Reality of Caste
- 18.4 Two Theoretical Perspectives
 - 18.4.1 The Interactional Approach
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- 18.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 18.6 Key Words
- 18.7 Further Readings
- 18.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

18.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you should be able to :

- Locate the divergent meanings of caste;
- Outline the historical context of caste; and
- Delineate two theoretical perspectives on caste.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

“Caste has been the fundamental institution of traditional India”, writes Andre Beteille. Indeed it is so basic to Hindu society that M. N. Srinivas can say, “it is impossible to detach Hindustan from the caste system.” But the non-Hindu communities in India are also pervaded by caste. For although Christians, Muslims and Sikhs were religiously opposed to such an ideal of “institutional inequality”, they presented no viable alternative social organization in the Indian context, and so ended up being acculturated into the caste system. One would naturally expect to find the fullest expression of this institution in Hindu society where it originated, but other communities on the sub-continent have closely related if more latent expressions of the same.

As an institution caste has both structure and values, it is both a principle of social organization and a social ideology. Given the centrality of caste in Indian society and its antithetical relation to modernity, we can see immediately that any change in this institution would have a critical impact on the modernization process in such a society. Indeed, we can expect a crucial ‘multiplier effect’ for any change in this area. However, when we come to the empirical evidence available, the indications are not as direct as one might expect. In reality no social institution ‘disappears’, specially one so embedded as caste. The more realistic question to ask is: what new forms is caste taking, if any, in the changing situation and how do these effect the modernization process?

To set the question thus raised in a broader framework, it is imperative to grasp the meaning of caste and its historical context. For all change, no matter how drastic it is,

Explaining Caste in Indian Society always includes some continuity with the past, that is crucial to a complete understanding of the present, and more so to a projection of the future. But first we must delimit more carefully what we mean by caste.

18.2 THE DIVERGENT MEANINGS OF CASTE

There are two different senses in which caste is used and these give rise to two divergent interpretations of its origin and meaning. Leave notes that “As an ethnographic category it refers exclusively to a system of social organization peculiar to Hindu India, but as a sociological category it may denote almost any kind of class structure of exceptional rigidity.” The first conceptualises caste in socio-cultural terms and stresses its unique ritual aspects in Indian society; the second analyses caste in terms of power relations prevalent in the political economy of a society. The first approach has tended to stress the attributional or cultural dimension of caste and so restricts the term to the Indian context, as opposed to the second, which emphasises the interactional or structural one, that can be generalised beyond.

Anthropology has been inclined to the first sense. Here caste is defined with a list of cultural traits that supposedly form a syndrome. Hutton enumerates seven such characteristics: endogamy, restrictions on commensality, hierarchical grading of castes, the concept of pollution related to food, sex and ritual, association with traditional occupations, hereditary ascription of caste status, the prestige of the Brahman.

However, this procedure has been rightly criticized by Dumont for such lists give us “a combination of distinct features, a *combination* which apparently springs from an historical accident.” And so it does not get us beyond a purely historical explanation of caste. Going beyond this, then, some anthropologists have attempted a ‘structural analysis’ to get to the ‘deep structural’ principle from which the traits derive.

Hocart was the first to single out the principle of hierarchy in relation to caste. He held it to be essentially a religious hierarchy deriving directly from religious ceremony. Modifying this somewhat and elaborating it further, Dumont concludes to the opposition between the pure and the impure that is constitutive of this ritual hierarchy and the separation of the *jatis* the local sub-castes.

Activity 1

Think about the various divergent meanings of caste. Talk to people in your community about them. Does a consensus emerge? Note down your findings in a note book.

Sociology, on the other hand, in search for a more general and comparative scheme in which to conceptualize caste has interpreted the phenomena with the stratification model. Stratification systems are seen to lie on a continuum from closed to open. Thus Lynch considers that the “the difference between a real class system and a real caste system is based upon which end of the continuum, form mutually exclusive to cross-cutting status-sets, they approach.”

The classic Weberian model of class, status and power has provided a more adequate and more frequently used schema for a sociological understanding of caste. Here caste is interpreted as a special kind of status group based on the principle of a “clan charisma” that is inherited. The proliferation of castes is accounted for by “caste schism”, that may derive from several factors, migration, new sect formation, occupational differentiation, ... This model allows for the interaction of the different orders. Hence while caste differentiation is primarily religious, political power cooperates to legitimate it and economic interests help to sustain it. The fact that the caste phenomena are not reduced to a single dimension provides a take-off point for a multivariate analysis that has been used so extensively in stratification studies.

18.3 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The difference between these two approaches is carried even to the sources of evidence

they fall back on. Two principle sources can be distinguished: the literary and the historical. The first derives from the sacred books of the law, the Smriti and the Dharmashastra. The second source derives from non-textual historical data and field research.

The first Indologists were not historians or social scientists, they were primarily interested in Indian languages and literature. So we can understand why the literary source of evidence was predominantly used in early studies on India, and how the ideological approach to caste was adopted. But this was essentially a Brahmanical view, that inevitably stressed an ideological and ritual understanding of caste. Today there is an increasing emphasis on the second source and a consequent change in the historical picture of caste, with greater emphasis on the social reality of inter-group relations and the power equations this involves. Although there is divergence between these two pictures of caste, they must be considered in conjunction if a comprehensive understanding is to be attempted, for there is always an important reciprocity between social ideology and social structure.

The official Hindu ideology of caste is expressed in the scheme of the varnas into which all sub-castes are grouped. Srinivas recounts for us its main features. "(1) There is a single all-India hierarchy without any variations between one region and another; (2) there are only four varnas, or, if the Harijans, who are literally 'beyond the pale' of caste, are included, five; (3) the hierarchy is clear; and (4) it is immutable," (1966: 23) But he criticizes the concept as being too one-sided: "concentration on varna also meant stressing the attributional or ritual factors in mutual caste ranking at the expense of economic and political factors." And elsewhere he concludes: "the fact that the concept continues to be relevant for understanding some aspects of caste and has only helped to perpetuate the misconceptions and distortions implicit in it." (1966:1)

18.3.1 Social Reality of Caste

Srinivas insists that the social reality of the caste system is not varna-the ideological categorization-but jati-the sub-caste that is the actually interacting group. And it is here that he finds evidence to challenge and modify the ideological implications of varna. But just when we might expect the devaluation of varna as a scientific concept we find its inflation as the social ideology of mobility movements. Indeed if varna is not a behavioral concept, it does in fact underlie 'jati', and its reality shaping possibilities cannot be denied.



The Social Reality of Caste is not Varna but Jati
Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

1) Write a note on the historical context of caste. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) What does Srinivas mean by the social reality of caste. Write down your answer in about five lines.

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In his concept of 'Sanskritization' Srinivas has made a crucial contribution to our understanding of caste in its historical context. For here he links the ideological hierarchy with interactional mobility and does away with the old stereotype of caste as an institution that admitted of no change or mobility.

He defines the process for us thus: "Sanskritization is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste." (Srinivas 1966:6) He considers the most important reference group of other models as well. In fact the culturally patterned expressiveness of the Kshatriya is more accessible and has been more widely used than the culturally patterned asceticism of the Brahmins.

Historical evidence for this process is now undisputed. "Sanskritization has been a major process of cultural change in Indian history, and it has occurred in every part of the Indian subcontinent. It may have been more active at some periods than at others, and some parts of India are more Sanskritized than others, but there is no doubt that the process has been universal. For instance, K. M. Pannikar maintains that the last true Kshatriyas were the Nandas who disappeared in the fifth century. Since then the Sudras have produced an unusually large number of royal families. In fact it was always the king, the secular power, that determined the hierarchical order of castes on the advice of the Brahmins, the religious authority.

Thus through the process of Sanskritization, changes in economic interest and political power of groups could be accommodated, for it provided a symbolic justification in terms of the caste ideology for the de facto results of the interactional process. It is important to note that the changes we are considering are positional not structural, and the mobility here refers not to individual mobility in the span of a life-time, or familial mobility across a generation or two, but to community mobility that spans many generations. Such social mobility cannot be measured by the criteria developed for an individualist society as in the West. In fact it may not even be noticed by such criteria. The need to symbolically justify de facto mobility by Sanskritization is an important indication of the crucial role of ideology in any process of modernization and change in India.

Notice that 'Westernization' runs in a direction opposite to that of 'Sanskritization', but whereas the latter has affected the whole of Indian society for centuries, the former is a comparatively recent and incomplete phenomenon, largely an urban one besides. There is,

however, a basic similarity between the two for both are at the cultural level: “to describe the social changes in modern India in terms of Sanskritization and Westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural and not structural terms.” Further both processes are based on a ‘psychology of borrowing’.

18.4 TWO THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVES

We have distinguished two basic approaches to the institution of caste: one ideological with an emphasis on culture and a hierarchical model, the other interactional with an emphasis on structure and the stratification model. The first focuses on its ritual symbolism, the second on the power relations. Both approaches are concerned with the same changing social reality of caste today but we need hardly be surprised to find them make divergent interpretations and conclusions about its relation to the modernization process.

18.4.1 The Interactional Approach

The interactional approach is the more prevalent one today. However, the uni-dimensional model has been found inadequate, specially the orthodox Marxist model with its economic reductionism, which seems hardly credible when the religious and political overtones of caste are reduced to epi-phenomena in the super-structure.

The classic multi-dimensional model of Weber has greater potentiality for a better understanding of caste and has been frequently used ever since Weber himself first applied it to caste. Beteille has applied the Weberian model in a careful case study of a South Indian village. Beteille concludes to a trend towards a shift from a closed to an open stratification system. Whereas fifty years ago the caste structure largely subsumed economic and political gradations, today with the emergence of caste-free occupations and power resources other than the ones tied to land, there is less status consistency between the three areas of caste, class and power, and a trend to the autonomization of each.

The Sanskritization that was the chief channel of mobility in pre-independent India can very easily be described in terms of this theory. But the socio-economic changes in post-independent India and particularly the new found status of ‘citizen’ and ‘voter’ that lower caste groups have activated makes political participation serve as a fundamental alternative towards mobility instead of Sanskritization. Indeed the whole Buddhist movement among the navbudhs is rightly interpreted as a rejection of Sanskritization. Lynch is emphatic “that political participation ... is the path that mobility movements will increasingly follow in India.”

Box 18.01

The effect of this participation on caste as an adaptive institution is clearly two fold: a conservative one on the internal social organization of caste which will tend to preserve its integrity to mobilize more effectively; and a more creative one in its external relations to other castes as they attempt to maximize their share of scarce resources to power, prestige and wealth, and evolve a “civil politics of primordial compromise”. For the very interdependence brought about by the market economy and democratic politics gives groups there power of contravailing the objectives of the others. The first effect will tend to conserve caste loyalties, the second to create broader ones. Thus Lynch concludes: “The very process of modernization itself brings forth and exacerbates the competing loyalties of citizenship and caste statutes in the struggle of a new state to become a nation.”

18.4.2 The Attributional Approach

The interactional approach to caste draws attention to the structural aspect as opposed to the attributional one. However, for an institution like caste the ‘ideology’ supporting it of critical importance to a proper understanding of caste and the identity politics of today. In the Indian context Dumont has made an incisive statement against the use of a stratification model for caste in his *Homo Hierarchicus* and has forced attention to the ideological approach once again. We will examine both approaches in greater detail in the next unit

Explaining Caste in Indian Society (unit 19). Attributional approach is based on more on specific features of caste including the ascriptive criteria.

In urging the relevance of the principle of hierarchy Dumont notes how alien it is to the modern mentality. Modern man's ideology is decidedly egalitarian and individualistic, diametrically opposite to a hierarchical and collectivist one. But whereas equality is an ideal to be socially realized, hierarchy is a reality that is a societal given. For if a society is functionally differentiated it must also be value integrated to be viable. This inevitably introduces a rank order and the principle of hierarchy with it. Thus Dumont observes: "man does not only think, he acts. He has not only ideas, but values. To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy." (1972:54)

A hierarchy, then, integrates a society by reference to its values. Dumont defines hierarchy "as the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole." (ibid.:104) However, this ranking is not in terms of 'a scale of power' but of 'a gradation of statuses'. For hierarchy expresses, not the material unity of a society brought about by a generalized medium of exchange like power, or money, or prestige (this is precisely how the stratification model derives), but it essentially expresses its conceptual or symbolic unity, one that includes that the social order in a cosmic one. In others words, the social order is perceived as but the ritual expression of the cosmic one.

18.4.3 Religious Hierarchy

The symbolic unity is elaborated in the hierarchical relation, "a relation between larger and smaller, or more precisely between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed." (ibid.:24) For Dumont: in every society one aspect of social life receives a primary value stress and simultaneously is made to encompass all others and express them as far as it can. In the context of the caste system, which is a religious hierarchy, this would mean that functions in which the religious aspect is minimal are *encompassed* within a system that is decisively shaped by religious functions. This religious hierarchy is ritually expressed in the opposition between the 'pure' and the 'impure'. It is this fundamental dichotomy that underlines the separateness and distinction between caste while including them all in a hierarchical whole.

Dumont's concept of hierarchy as applied to caste, which he considers a case of 'pure hierarchy', is indeed challenging but not without its critics. Mckim Marriot finds a remarkable consensus about caste hierarchical rankings but he links it primarily to four dimensions of community structure and not to an ideology. He concludes his study thus:

"the ritual hierarchy itself in part grows out of, expresses, and tends to remain positively correlated with, and therefore indirectly influenced by economic, political, and other non-ritual hierarchies of interaction. Most castes appear ultimately to achieve positions in the ritual hierarchy which are in harmony with their relative possession of wealth and power."

Dumont is aware of such 'status consistency' but he still insists on the primacy of attribution over interaction as *the* factor in the ranking order. Thus in reference to the untouchables he writes "that the overwhelming religious inferiority of these castes in effect expresses and encompasses their strict secular dependence on the dominant castes." (1972:180) While there is social mobility, through the symbolic justification implied in the process of Sanskritization, it is accommodated as positional, not structural change. This is in effect a reaffirmation of the hierarchical principle.

18.4.4 Dumont's Approach

The ideological emphasis of Dumont's approach is fairly successful in an analysis of a stable social situation where we would expect a consistent reciprocity between structure and culture. But in the context of social change there may arise inconsistencies and strains between these two elements as cultural lags develop in which either element could be the primary factor precipitating the change. A comprehensive explanation of change must

include both elements, specially in the context of modernization, since this implies both structural and cultural changes of far reaching consequences. Dumont's analysis while very insightful in its interpretation of the traditional caste system, needs to be complemented in its analysis of the changing caste situation today.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a brief note on the two theoretical approaches to the institution of caste. Use about five to ten lines for your answer.

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- 2) Write true or False

- i) Srinivas wrote Homo Hierarchicus
True False
- ii) The religious hierarchy is ritually expressed in the opposition between the pure and the impure.
True False

He is aware that the social mobility in evidence in India today is no longer contained by the caste hierarchy. He notes that we are witnessing

“the transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units, to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective individual (in the sense we have given this word), as a substance.” (ibid.269)

This is the 'substantialization' of caste, each caste group becoming a moral individual entity that confronts other such groups. On the behavioral level this implies the substitution of competition for cooperation, from the ideological point of view this would mean the transformation of structure into substance, from vertically integrated groups to horizontally discrete ones.

Box 18.02

In a competition for resources this inevitably leads to mobilization of, and conflict among, castes. Whereas the old interaction of interdependent caste groups was contained by the hierarchical ideology, what ideological consensus will contain this new group competition and conflict? In a modern democracy, elective structures and an egalitarian ideology are meant to perform this function. But even these do breakdown in times of rapid change and crisis, as we seem to be experiencing today.

Dumont underscores for us the need for an encompassing cultural ideology, for this will not automatically grow out of the interactional process that is dissolving caste hierarchy. The hope that “modernization should have a scattered caste from the outset” (ibid. 272) was innocent of any consideration of the importance of hierarchy in India. Given the collectivist orientation of Indian society we need hardly be surprised that caste has found expression in communalism of various kinds. Srinivas observes that “the concept of the unity of India is essentially a religious one” The secularism implicit in the rejection of the caste hierarchy requires the acceptance of a new concept of India as a unified political, economic, cultural entity, if communalism is to be contained by nationalism.

Activity 2

Why does Dumont feel that caste is a religious hierarchy? Think about it, talk to other students and community members and note down your findings in your notebook.

18.5 LET US SUM UP

In the context the dual aspects of caste i.e. ritual symbolism and power relations, it is important to consider both interactional and attributional approaches. Both structure and culture and changing in Indian society today. We must follow the changes in both dimensions and resist the temptation of reducing one to the other, or of emphasizing one over the other.

Let us now attempt to draw together the trends of this discussion. The interactionists focus on the power equation in the political economy and their rationalisation in terms of the imperatives of a democratic polity and a planned or market economy. At the cultural level this implies an individuation of a democratic egalitarian ideology. The attributional approach, on the other hand, specially as developed by Dumont, sees in this democratic challenge to caste hierarchy its re-emergence as communalism, where the cultural identities of groups are not hierarchically harmonised, but stand in opposition to each other. At the structural level this is the ‘substantialization’ of caste. The first is epitomized by ‘caste as ritual hierarchy’, the second by ‘caste as power structure’. There is then a certain divergence in these two approaches that derives from their original points of departure. But this insight can be used to bring the contributions of each into relief.

Van de Berghe has pointed out that “pluralist societies have often been held together by a mixture of *political coercion* and *economic interdependence*.” If political power can be used to create and preserve unequal social relations, it can also be used to be used to redress this injustice. Social conflict does indeed have its functions! However, the very exercise of power in a situation of interdependence requires some level of value-consensus however general it may be. Otherwise society would fall into a situation of total conflict, the barbarism of Hobbes’ “war of all against all”. Hence the insistence on the need for an ideology to support this interdependence, to contain the conflict, and to provide the value-consensus for a just and equitable society.

18.6 KEY WORDS

- Caste** : There are many hundreds of caste or jati. They are not to be confused with the abstract model of varna of which these are only four.
- Ethnographic** : Relating to data or theory and observation about a particular culture.
- Power** : The ability to influence a situation due to position and status for one’s own/communities benefit.
- Ritual** : A series of ordered actions directed towards an objective which could be religious or magical.

18.7 FURTHER READINGS

Dumont, L, (1972), *Homo Hierarchicus; The Caste System and its Implications*. London, Granada.

Srinivas, M.N., (1966) *Social Change in Modern India*. Bombay. Orient Longman

13.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) There are two primary sources for the institution of caste, namely the literary and the historical. First the scholars studied the *Smriti* and the *Dharmashastra*. This led to a Brahmanical view of caste. Today there is a greater emphasis on history which has greater emphasis on inter-group relations and power equations.
- 2) By social reality of caste Srinivas means that the caste system is not varna, but jati. That is to say the sub-caste is the interacting group. However varna does underlie jati and is capable of shaping reality, through, for examples, the process of Sanskritization.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The two basic approaches to caste are the interactional and attributional. The attributional has an ideological approach with an emphasis on culture and hierarchy. The interactional approach emphasizes structure and the stratification model.
- 2) i) False
ii) True.



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UNIT 19 CASTE IDENTITY: ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTIONAL APPROACHES

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Early Explanations of Caste
 - 19.2.1 Religious Explanations
 - 19.2.2 Sociological Explanations
- 19.3 Attributional Approaches to Caste
 - 19.3.1 G.S. Ghurye
 - 19.3.2 J.H. Hutton
 - 19.3.3 M.N. Srinivas
- 19.4 Interactional Approaches to Caste
 - 19.4.1 F.G. Bailey
 - 19.4.2 A. Mayer
 - 19.4.3 M. Mariott
 - 19.4.4 L. Dumont
- 19.5 Attributional and Interactional Approaches: An Appraisal
- 19.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.7 Key Words
- 19.8 Further Readings
- 19.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

19.0 OBJECTIVES

On having studied this unit you should be able to:

- Outline early explanations of caste;
- Describe the attributional approaches to caste;
- Highlight the main aspects of the interactional approaches to caste; and
- Become acquainted with some of the limitations of the attributional and interactional approaches to caste.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste identity is closely linked with the social fabric of a village, town or city. In the unit that follows we describe and analyze some of the major attempts to explain the ranking order that is ubiquitous so far as caste formations are concerned. To acquaint you with these approaches we will point out to you some of the early religious and sociological explanations of caste. This will set the backdrop for the attributional approaches to caste which analyze caste hierarchy in terms of the various immutable characteristics of caste. The incursion into these approaches is followed by the interactional approaches to caste hierarchy. Finally the unit picks up the threads of the approaches described and analysed

in the unit and points out the limitations of the types of the approaches that have been presented. This will round off our discussion on caste identity and how it maintains itself or mutates.

19.2 EARLY EXPLANATIONS OF CASTE

Various explanations of the origin of the caste have been forwarded, and early explanations often veer around the notion of 'attributes' or 'inalienable characteristics' of caste. Since we will be examining some of the explanations it would be better if we provide some idea of these characteristics. These are provided by religious theories and by secular sociological explanations. Let us now turn to the religious theories at first.

19.2.1 Religious Explanations

Religious explanations of caste origins in Hinduism refer to first of all the theory of 'divine origin' of caste. The idea in this theory is developed from verses in the Rig Veda right up to the Bhagavad Gita in contemporary times. It must be added that this is a Brahmanical version and not shared by many other communities.

Box 19.01

The legend goes that in the beginning of time the original Being 'produced' the various Varnas from different parts of his anthropomorphic body. Thus the Brahmins were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his chest; the Vaisyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. The dimension of the 'rank order' or hierarchical ordering was attached to the work that each of these categories were to perform. The topmost or highest social duties were assigned to the Brahmins and these were functions of the preserving knowledge and performing priestly duties. In the case of Kshatriyas the duties to be performed were that of the defending society from invasion, stable administration and protection of society in general. The Vaisyas were the bastions of trade and commerce and this was to be done in a fair and honest way. The Shudras which came lowest in the hierarchy thus laid down were a service varna which was to cater to the needs of all the varnas above them.

The varna scheme is a four fold scheme. It is further pointed out with reference to the theory of divine origin that over time each of the varnas developed into jatis or caste groups with specific attributes. The first three groups made up a category of the "twice born" and were initiated into the caste by the Sacred thread ceremony (yagyapavita). Each of the groups began specializing in particular type of profession and was restrained from performing the work of any other caste. Hierarchy was manifested both in attributional and interactional modes.

A second type of religious explanation is based on the guna theory, which is to be found in the religious literature including the Bhagavad Gita. This theory talks of the inherent qualities that characterize human beings. These three gunas are as below:

- i) 'sattva', or the quality of truth, Knowledge, goodness, virtue and alertness;
- ii) 'rajas' or the quality of activity, courage, bravery, force, power and passion;
- iii) 'tamas' or the quality of gloominess, dullness, stupidity and indolence.

It is easy to see how the above qualities were associated hierarchically with the Brahmins being considered 'Sattvic'; the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas being considered below the Brahmins, and being rajasic. Finally on the lowest rung of the ladder were the 'tamasic' Shudras.

19.2.2 Sociological Explanations

Unlike religious explanations the early sociological explanations of caste moved toward socially recognizable reality. Let us consider this briefly in the work of i) Karl Marx ii) Max Weber and iii) Celestin Bouglé.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society i) For Marx the relationships of social groups to land and its ownership determined the groups position in society. Thus for him in the Indian village these were:

- a) castes working on land
- b) artisans and service classes

The castes working on land produced a surplus which according to Marx, they gave to the artisan castes. These in turn gave the former a part of the traditional craft. Thus both castes produced for their own needs and for exchange, and harmony prevailed. This "village republic" model has since been criticized as utopic.



Castes are placed in a hierarchy according to their level of purity

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Outline the early Sociological explanation of caste according to Karl Marx in about five lines.

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In the case of Max Weber, caste was considered to be a 'status groups' whose group members were recognized by their social, and economic position. These entailed a particular life-style, which in itself was curtailed by certain restrictions on interaction, including the kind of work which could be done. The relationship between castes was also determined by the ritual opposition between the states of 'purity' and 'pollution' which could be associated with persons or objects. Thus castes were placed in a hierarchy according to their level of purity. Thus the Brahmins level of purity was highest as they followed 'clean' occupations such as priesthood. It was important too that the 'purity' be maintained through avoidance of those who were impure. For this reason Weber argued that caste was an extreme form of stratification.

For Bouglé who wrote after Weber a caste was recognized by its place in the hierarchy and by the occupation its members followed. Castes were constrained and other social restrictions that were imposed upon them. Thus hierarchy and separation between groups were the attributes that helped maintain the status of a caste in the hierarchy order and determined interactional patterns.

19.3 ATTRIBUTIONAL APPROACHES TO CASTE

We now turn to some other scholars who used the early insights of Max Weber and Bouglé to develop what has come to be known as the "attributional approach". Attributional approach discusses primarily the significant features of the caste system qua system and what distinguishes it from other forms of the social stratification.

Attributes are inherent inalienable qualities associated with the caste system. As such every caste must necessarily partake of these attributes.

19.3.1 G.S Ghurye

Ghurye wrote in the 1930's and considered that each caste was separated from the other in a hierarchical order. This ordering sprang legitimately from its attributes of a caste. These were:

- i) **Segmental Division.** Thus membership to a caste group is acquired by birth and with it come the position in the rank order relative to other castes.
- ii) **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.
- iii) **Caste Restrictions.** 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, rituals and from who they could accept food. The system was geared to maintain purity of the group members, hence of the caste group itself.
- iv) **Caste Pollution.** In this idea the whole effort of a caste was to avoid contamination from polluting objects (those involved unclean occupations, or of the lowest caste). This shunning of pollution is reflected in the residential separation of the caste groups.
- v) **Traditional Occupation.** Ghurye felt that every caste had a traditional occupation the clean castes had clean occupations whereas the unclean and impure caste had defiling ones.
- vi) **Endogamy.** 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 one's caste.

Thus through six attributes Ghurye sought to define the process by which a caste group maintained its caste identity. By preserving the various attributes of segmental division, hierarchy, caste restrictions, caste pollution, traditional occupation, and marriage within a

Explaining Caste in Indian Society particular caste circle, the caste group maintained its own separate (through interrelated) identity which it sought to perpetuate over generations.

Activity 1

Discuss the attributes of caste according to G. S. Ghurye with fellow students. Note down your findings in your notebook.

19.3.2 J.H. Hutton

Hutton had described the caste structure in his book *Caste in India*. Hutton held that the central feature of the caste system was endogamy. Around this fact are built up the various restrictions and taboos. Interaction must not violate these restrictions placed on the various castes. Another important feature of the caste system as seen by Hutton was the taboo on taking cooked food from any caste but one's own. Such restrictions raise questions in themselves:

- i) Who cooks the food?
- ii) What type of pot was the food cooked in?
- iii) Is the food "kaccha" uncooked or (cooked in water) or "pakka" (fried in oil). The latter is acceptable from other castes as well.
- iv) There is a hierarchy of food and vegetarian food is ranked higher than non vegetarian food. Brahmins are usually vegetarian but not everywhere in Bengal and Kashmir Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food as well.

These restrictions reflect the process of the formation of caste identity. They are reflective of separation and hierarchy between the caste groups. Thus non-acceptance of food reflects superiority of rank. The whole idea of maintaining 'purity' and reducing 'pollution' is also found to permeate the interactions.

In parts of the South India for instance the fear of pollution gets translated into physical distance being maintained between the superior and inferior caste. Again the castes low in rank order have to avoid village temples and well and maintain a physical distance in their interaction with higher caste members. Thus Hutton explains caste interactions with the notion of attributes of a caste, primarily in terms of endogamy, purity and impurity and restrictions on commensality. You will have noticed the overlap in Ghurye's Hutton's approaches.

19.3.3 M.N. Srinivas

Before proceeding further it may be mentioned that the scholars using the attributional approach stress the attributes of a caste. However each of them lays emphasis on one or other of these attributes and how they affect interaction. In the case of Srinivas writing in the 50's we find that he chooses to study the structure of relations arising between castes on the basis of these attributes. Thus he introduces a dynamic aspect of caste identity very forcefully.

This aspect becomes clearer in Srinivas's work on positional mobility known as 'Sanskritization'. Sanskritization is a process whereby a caste attempts to raise its rank within the caste hierarchy by adopting in practice, the attributes of the caste or castes above them, in the rank order. This is to say the 'low' attributes are gradually dropped and the 'high' attributes of the castes above them are imitated. This involves adoption of vegetarianism, clean occupations of so on.

Closely connected is the concept of dominant caste. The dominant caste in a village is conspicuous by its :

- i) Sizeable numerical presence
- ii) Ownership of land
- iii) Political power.

Thus a dominant caste has numerical significance as well as economic and political power. It is also interesting to note that the dominant caste need not be the highest ranking caste in the village caste hierarchy. The dominant caste commands the service of all other castes.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Give a summary of the attributional theory of caste according to M.N. Srinivas in about 10 lines.

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19.4 INTERACTIONAL APPROACHES TO CASTE

Interaction approach takes into account how castes are actually ranked with respect to one another in a local empirical context.

We have already seen how attributes of a caste be used as a approach to study caste. It would also have come clear to your that a set of attributes denotes its own interactional processes. Thus we cannot say that attributes have no bearing or interaction. On the other hand we find that the interaction too has its attributional aspects. So the questions comes down to which of these aspects in emphasized more than the other, and given primacy in analyzing the caste dynamics and identity formation. Let us study some of the pioneering works so for a interactional approaches to the study of caste are concerned.

19.4.1 F.G. Bailey

Bailey feels that caste dynamics and identity are united by the two principles of segregation and hierarchy. He feels that “Castes Stand in ritual and secular hierarchy expressed in the rules of interaction”. The ritual system overlaps the political and economic system.

Box 19.02

The relationship between castes does not comprise rituals alone-there is a power dimension because there exists a dominant caste to which other castes are subordinate. Rank and caste identity are expressed by a lower caste attempting to emulate a caste which is higher in rank. Thus the interaction pattern becomes indicative of ritual status the rank order hierarchy. Interactional pattern itself involves attitudes and practices towards the question of acceptance and non acceptance of food, services, water, smoking together, seating arrangements at feasts and the exchange of gifts.

Bailey explained his viewpoint with reference to village Bisipara in Orissa; and showed how the caste situation in Bisipara become changed and more fluid after Independence when the Kshatriyas lost much of their land. This caused a downslide in their ritual ranking as well. There was a clearly discernable change in the interaction patterns which we have delineated above e.g. acceptance and non acceptance of food from other castes.

Mayer studied Ramkheri village in Madhya Pradesh. To understand the effect on caste hierarchy Mayer observed interactive between castes in term of:

- i) Commensality of eating drinking water and smoking
- ii) Food type exchanged whether is 'kaccha' or 'pakka'
- iii) Context of eating, ritual or otherwise
- iv) Seating arrangements at eating
- v) Who provides food and who cooked it
- vi) The vessel in which water is given - metal or earthen.

Thus the commensal hierarchy is based on the belief that any or all of the above factors can lead to greater or lesser pollution for a caste thus affecting its identity and ranking in the hierarchy order. Those at the top of the hierarchical order will ensure that only a caste or type of food and water vessel which will not pollute them is accepted or used by them. For example pakka food may be accepted from a lower caste but kaccha food will be accepted only from within the same caste or subcaste.

19.4.3 M. Marriott

Marriott analyses caste hierarchy with reference to the local context. Marriott studied the arrangement of caste ranking in ritual interaction. Marriott confirmed that ritual hierarchy is itself linked to economic and political hierarchies. Usually economic and political ranks tend to coincide. That is to say both ritual and non-ritual hierarchies affect the ranking in the caste order though ritual hierarchies tend to play a greater role. In this way a consensus emerges regarding caste ranking and this is collectively upheld. It must be made clear here that this process is not as clear cut as it first seems. This is because the sociologist enters the field when this process of caste ranking is in its full blown form and he or she does not observe the historical process and took place by deduces or infers about the same, from the data that is available on hand.

Marriott studied Kishan Garhi and Ram Nagla two villages in the Aligarh District of U.P. in 1952. Marriott's study showed that there is consensus about caste ranking in these villages. The basis on which this is done is on the observation of ritual of ritual interaction, in the village itself.

In the villages Marriott studied we find that the important indicators or rank are:

- i) Giving and receiving of food
- ii) Giving and receiving of honorific gestures and practices
- iii) Thus Brahmins are ranked high since they officiate at the most exclusive and important rituals. They simultaneously receive all services from the other castes. Again Brahmins accept only "pakka" food from another group of high castes. Thus a caste can be considered high if Brahmins accept 'pakka' food from them and low if Brahmins accepting 'kaccha' food from them. There were ten such 'high' castes in Kishan Garhi and four such 'high' castes in Ram Nagla. The lowest caste does not receive any service from other castes, but has to provide its services to all other castes and had made it a practice to accept 'Kaccha' food from them as well.

Activity 2

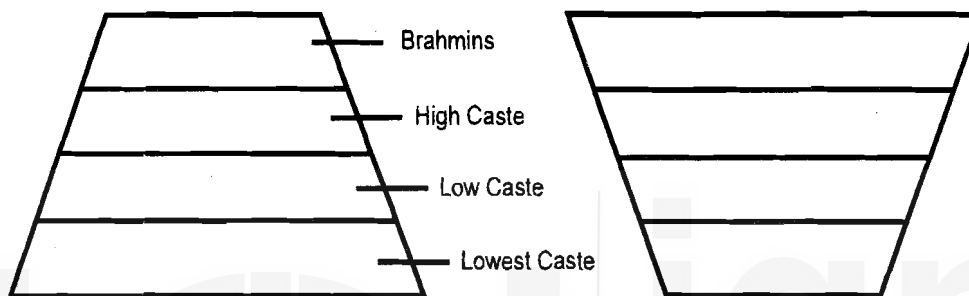
Discuss the important indicators of rank according to Mayer and Marriott with students and friends. Note down your discoveries in your notebook.

Food and services, and how they are offered and accepted are therefore major indicators of caste ranking. However Marriott observed that there were rules also about :

- i) smoking together,
- ii) the arrangement of the housing complex
- iii) details and bodily contact
- iv) feasting and the order in which the food is served.

In Kishan Garhi political and economic dominance matched the ritual hierarchy. Let us see how ritual status and economic power (land ownership) overlap:

Rank and Land Ownership in Kishan Garhi



Thus there is a tendency among castes to transform their political and economic status into ritual status.

However inconsistencies can and do exist. This gives room for social mobility. Again, though it is true that the local interaction is important, but a reference to other villages can also help determined local rank. However, by and large the ritual hierarchy tends to be consistent with political and economic dominance. Interaction sustains a given ranking order which can be witnessed in the various facts that have been mentioned.

19.4.4 L. Dumont

Dumont added a new dimension to the studies of caste in an interactional perspective. His study of caste emphasizes relations between castes rather than attributes. Attributes can be only be explained with reference to the relationship between castes. According to Dumont the local context has a role in caste ranking and identity, but this is a response to the ideology of hierarchy which extends over the entire caste system. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic, political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. For Dumont caste is a special type of inequality and hierarchy is the essential value underlying the caste system, and it is this value that integrates Hindu society.

The various aspects of the caste, says Dumont are based on the principle of opposition between the pure and impure underlying them. 'Pure' is superior to the 'impure' and has to be kept separate. Thus the caste system appears to be rational to those because of the opposition between the pure and the impure.

Dumont also feels that hierarchy in the caste system indicates ritual status without accepting the influences of wealth or power authority. Thus hierarchy is the principle through which the elements are ranked in relation to the whole. Ranking is basically religious in nature. In Indian society Status (Brahmins) has always been separated from power (King). To go further, power has been subordinated to 'status'. The king is subordinate to the priest, but both are dependent on each other. Thus hierarchy is something ritualistic in nature and supported by religion. Only when power is subordinated to status, can this type of pure hierarchy develop. The Brahmins who represents purity is superior and at the top of the whole system. But the Brahmin along with the king opposes all the other categories of the Varna system.

Explaining Caste in Indian Society For Dumont the Jajmani system of economic interaction is a ritual expression rather than an economic arrangement. Jajmani system is the religious expression of inter dependence where interdependence itself is derived from religion. Similarly, commensal regulations emphasize hierarchy rather than separation. However, the question of purity does not arise on all such occasions of commensality. Thus the washerman is a 'purifier' and can enter the house freely. But he cannot attend a marriage party with similar caste.

Let us appraise now both the attributional and interactional approaches.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Briefly outline Dumont's theory of interactional caste ranking in ranking in about 10 lines.

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19.5 ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTION APPROACHES: AN APPRAISAL

We are now in a position to point out some of the anomalies found in both the attributional and interactional approaches. Let us take first the attributional approach.

- i) M. Marriott points out that there were cases in Kishangarhi where the castes he examined did not seem to derive their position in the social hierarchy from their attributes. Thus he found that diet and occupational restrictions in some cases did not negate caste rank or identity.
- ii) Again the placement of castes in Kishan Garhi did not follow from highness and lowness of occupation. Thus the facts did not fit the theory.
- iii) There may in fact be discrepancies between attribute of a caste and its rank. Thus in a Mysore village studied by Srinivas the traders caste is vegetarian and follows a clean occupation relative to the peasants. Yet peasants are ranked about traders.
- iv) There is also the problem of which of the attributes is more and which of the attributes is less important for ranking of castes.

It was due to these anomalies that the interactional approach was proposed as an alternative to the attributional approach. This has been presented earlier but is itself subject to some problems. Let us turn to these now.

- i) The interactional approach subsumes within it the importance of attributes. Thus interaction alone cannot account for rank without reference to attributes
- ii) Apart from Dumont interaction theory localizes hierarchy and propounds that ranking is an outcome of interaction. Thus there is an emphasis on separation rather than hierarchy. Dumont's position is that the ideology of purity and pollution relates to the whole of Hindu society rather just a part of it.

- iii) In the case of Dumont however the work is historical to a large extent, and the caste system appears to have remained stagnant over the ages, which is not true.
- iv) Although Dumont makes a clear separation between 'power' and 'status' it has also been argued that power has been historically converted to status.
- v) Finally the view of the caste as a university accepted ordered system of values (ideology) does little justice to the protest movements that have questioned caste division itself. The element of conflict is missing while the integrative function of caste is highlighted

19.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explored the features of caste rank and identity. We began with early explanations of caste, including the religious and sociological explanations. We then moved on to a presentation of the attribution approaches to caste including those of Ghurye, Hutton, and Srinivas. Following this we described the interactional alternative to caste ranking and identity, including the work of Bailey, Mayer, Marriott and Dumont. Having presented this view we appraised both of the approaches to caste ranking and identity, and found that there difficulties present in both. It is clear however that the work. Discussed presents a tremendous advance over the early religious and sociological explanations of caste hierarchy and ranking.

19.7 KEY WORDS

Attributes	: Qualities and features
Commensality	: Eating together or sitting together
Dominant Caste	: A caste which is influential in a village due to its economic and political power.
Endogamy	: Marriage only within a particular groups
Hierarchy	: Rank order in which items are arranged from high to low
Ideology	: A coherent consistent of set of ideas
Jajmani System	: Custom of ritualised, personal, specialized services offered by the dependent castes to the dominant castes.
Kaccha food	: Food that is uncooked, or cooked in water
Pakka food	: food cooked in ghee or oil
Pollution	: A state created by coming into contact with 'unclean' items or castes
Purity	: A state of ritual cleanliness, or being free from all polluting things and persons.

19.8 FURTHER READINGS

Madan T. N. (ed) 1971. On the Nature of Caste in India. *In Contributions to Indian Sociology* (N.S.), 5:1-81.

Mandelbaum D. G. 1987 *Society in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Mariott, M. 1959, "Interactional and Attributional Theories of Caste Ranking" in *Man in India* Vol. 34, No. 2.

Srinivas M.N. 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

19.9 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Early Sociological explanations regarding explanation of caste were notable for moving away from strictly religious explanations. Thus in the work of Karl Marx it was the relationship to ownership of land that determined the group's position in Society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Srinivas sees caste as a segmentary system. All castes are divided into sub-castes which are; i) endogamous; ii) have common occupation; iii) are units of social and ritual life; iv) follow a common culture; v) are governed by the village council or 'Panchayat'. The factors of hierarchy, caste occupation commensality and restrictions, principle of pollution and caste panchayat are also considered by Srinivas. Thus Srinivas's concept of 'Sanskritization' talks of a lower caste emulating higher caste attributes on order to rise higher within the ranking system.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) For Dumont the ideology of purity and pollution is a general one and not confined to any local context along. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. Hierarchies is the essential value underlying the caste system and it is this value that integrates Hindu Society. Caste has the principle of pure and impure underlying it.

'Pure' is superior to 'impure' and has to be kept separate. For Dumont power has been subordinated to status and thus the king is subordinate to the priest. Hierarchy is thus ritualistic and supported by religion.

UNIT 20 CASTE DYNAMICS: ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL

Structure

- 20.0 Objectives
- 20.1 Introduction
- 20.2 Ideal Typical Features of the Caste System
- 20.3 Concepts of Sanskritization Difference and Mobility
- 20.4 Changes and Mobility in the Caste System: Economic and Political Factors
- 20.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 20.6 Key Words
- 20.7 Further Readings
- 20.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

20.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the meaning of the caste system and its various ideal typical features;
- Analyse the problems of the above conceptualisation through the concepts of Sanskritization and Difference;
- Explain political and economic sources of mobility and change in the caste system; and
- Describe various changes that have taken place in the caste system during both pre-modern period and modern period.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with mainly various changes brought about by economic and political forces in the caste system. This task has been accomplished by explaining the meaning of various concepts as well as by referring to important sociological and anthropological studies. For better understanding of this problem we have divided this unit into three main sections.

The first section provides an ideal typical understanding of the caste system.

The second section provides meaning of the concepts of Sanskritization and Difference which make a critique of the this understanding by pointing out the dynamic nature of the caste system.

The third section provides an analysis of the changes and mobility in the caste system brought about by economic and political forces during both pre-modern period and modern period.

20.2 IDEAL TYPICAL FEATURES OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

In order to present a picture of caste dynamics it is imperative that we, first of all, understand ideal typical nature of the caste system. Such an exercise will help us to realize

various changes that have taken place in the caste system. It has been felt and realized in Indian sociology or social anthropology that the best way to understand the nature of the system various castes create by their interrelationships can be achieved by delineating the various features it exhibits. Features of the caste system discussed by G. S. Ghurye has been accepted by all but with some objections. Picture of the caste system that comes out from Ghurye characterisation can be considered ideal typical which is following.

i) Segmental Division of Society

The caste system divides society into various caste groups with a well developed life of their own. Membership of the group is determined by birth. The status of a person is determined by the traditional importance of the caste in which he has the fortune of being born. Caste is hereditary.

ii) Hierarchy

Hierarchy has been considered another important feature of the caste system. Position of a caste in hierarchy is determined by various factors such as (a) the items of its dietary, (b) acceptance and refusal of water and food from other castes, (c) the ritual it performs, (d) the customs it observes, (e) its traditional privileges and disabilities and (f) the myth of its origin. The castes who are placed upper in the hierarchy are considered to be purer than those who are placed lower.

For Dumont, the single true principle on which caste hierarchy is based is the opposition of the pure and the impure. To quote him, "This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure over the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical co-existence of the two opposites". Dumont considers hierarchy as the defining feature of the caste system because it is "the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole". It is a relation "between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed. It is responsible for the "linear order of castes from A to Z".

iii) Restriction on Feeding and Social Intercourse

To preserve the purity there are restrictions on feeding and social intercourse and minute rules are laid down with regard to the kind of food and drink that can be acceptable.

Activity 1

Note down in your notebook whether it is in the town or village where the ideal typical features of caste can be found. Discuss this note with students at the study centre.

iv) Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges of the Different Sections

The caste system imposes spatial segregation on castes which is the most clear cut mark of civil privileges and disabilities. Generally, the untouchable or the impure castes are made to live on the outskirts of villages.

v) Lack of unrestricted Choice of Occupation

The caste system determines occupation of a person. In other words, members of a caste or a group of allied castes are expected to follow a certain occupation.

vi) Restrictions on Marriage

The caste system imposes severe restrictions on marriage outside one's own caste. In other words, a caste forbids its members to marry persons outside it. Thus, caste is endogamous. Principle of endogamy is such a dominant feature of caste system that it has been argued that endogamy is 'the essence of caste system'.

20.3 CONCEPTS OF SANSKRITIZATION, DIFFERENCE, AND MOBILITY

The above presentation of the caste system as a closed system based on all inclusive principle of hierarchy which does not permit mobility for its members have not been accepted by all. Some sociologists and social anthropologists have raised objections and made valuable criticism of such conceptualisation. Criticism made by M.N. Srinivas and Dipankar Gupta through their concepts of Sanskritisation and Difference are the most noteworthy.

i) Sanskritization

The concept of sanskritization was developed by M.N. Srinivas to describe the dynamic nature of the caste system. Srinivas, defines the concept of Sanskritization as “a process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, frequently, ‘twice born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community”. It is a much broader definition of Sanskritization. It is neither confined to Brahmins as only reference group not to the imitation of mere rituals and religious practices. It also means imitation of ideologies.

This observation points out variations in and varieties of mobility or change in the caste system. To make his observation more powerful and empirically substantiated he cites the historical study of K.M. Pannikar. Pannikar holds the view that all Kshatriyas have come into being by usurpation of power by the lower castes and consequently the Kshatriya role and social position .

Srinivas further adds that though all non-dominant, particularly low or non-twice born castes want to sanskritize themselves but only those succeed whose economic and political conditions have improved.

ii) Difference

The concept of difference has been developed by Dipankar Gupta to present a picture of the caste system which is totally different from the one that we find in many books including Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*. Gupta claims that empirically as well as logically it is wrong to say that a single all inclusive hierarchy based on the principle of the opposition of purity and pollution can be a defining feature of the caste system. To quote him, “Any notion of hierarchy is arbitrary and valid from the perspective of certain individual castes. To state that pure hierarchy is one that is universally believed in, or one which legitimizes the position of those, who participate in the caste system is misleading. The separation between castes is not only on matters which connote the opposition between purity and pollution. Distinctions and diacritical notches which are not even remotely suggestive of purity and pollution are observed as strictly. Obversely, distinctions relating to purity and pollution do not systematically affect caste status. The cultivating Amot caste solemnize their Goraiya festival with the sacrifice of a pig and yet Brahmans take water from them” Gupta points out.

Box 20.01

Gupta argues that different origin tales or Jati puranas of different castes justify different hierarchies and the Brahmin is not always at the top. The existence of various models of Sanskritization for upward mobility which have been discussed in the previous section, also indicates strongly the presence of multiple caste hierarchies. Each of these origin tales or caste legends “Captures independently the essence of ‘difference’ between castes and are therefore logically of equal status”. The constitutive elements of ‘difference’ “are not arranged vertically or hierarchically, but horizontally or even separately”. Therefore, in the system of ‘difference’ one encounters discrete categories in place of a continuous scale. None of the castes considers that it is made up of unique substance, or that the substance in it are less pure. Each caste maintains its own traditions, customs and ideologies and, therefore, differentiates from others.

Therefore, Gupta opines that ‘difference’ and ‘ritualization of multiple social practices’ constitute the essence of the caste system. To quote him, “we will define the caste system as a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by the ritualization of

Brahmins for performing an important ceremony. This apart, a king used to raise or lower the ranks of casters as a reward or punishment.

The second source of mobility in the caste system during pre-modern period was the availability of marginal land which could be brought under the plough. This sort of land was always available everywhere. According to Burton Stein, this factor made possible the establishment of new settlements and even new regional societies which facilitated many individual families to change their caste status. This apart, various sub divisions which are found among several peasant castes such as Tamil Vellalas was caused by this spatial mobility.

ii) Modern Period

Modern period started with the British rule. In this period above mentioned sources of mobility in the caste system disappeared and new sources of mobility came into existence. The British rule introduced the process of modernisation and westernisation through certain new economic and political policies which affected social formation deeply and brought about structural change, to some extent, in it. Consequently the caste system underwent certain significant changes which added new structures and functions to it. Some most notable and significant economic and political policies listed by Srinivas are (1) the introduction of a single political role straddling the entire sub-continent; (2) the introduction of formal bureaucratic and military organisations; (3) the land survey and settlement work; (4) the introduction of tenurial reforms; (5) the introduction of private ownership to land which made it saleable; (6) making new economic opportunities in towns and cities available; (7) the introduction of the concept of equality of all citizens before the law; (8) providing right to everyone not to be imprisoned without resort due legal process; (9) introducing the freedom to practice as well as to propagate one's religion and culture, and (10) making suttee, human sacrifice and human slavery illegal.

Box 20.02

Independent India initiated various new political and economic policies to make economic, political and socio-cultural structures democratic and modern. These policies were aimed at bringing all-round development in the society such as industrial and urban growth, agricultural development, land reforms, human resource development, community development and the abolition of untouchability, suttee, human and animal sacrifice, idolatory, ritualism, polytheism, polygyny, infant marriage and the ban on widow remarriage. They accelerated the process of modernisation initiated by the British rule and added new dimensions to it. Consequently, change and mobility in the caste system gained momentum.

iii) Dissociation between caste and occupation

The most notable change in the caste system is the dissociation between caste and occupation. It is greater in the towns than in the rural areas, and much greater in the big cities. Due to industrialisation and modernisation a number of new occupations have come into existence which can be considered "caste-free". One can easily notice people belonging to a caste getting involved into various traditionally forbidden occupations. Brahmins can be seen working in shoe factory. Similarly, Harijans can be seen performing administrative and academic jobs. Dissociation between caste and occupation has developed to such an extent that the phenomenon of caste can no longer be defined on the basis of its relation to a certain occupation.

iv) Disintegration of the Jajmani System

Related with this change in the caste system is the disintegration of the jajmani system. This phenomenon signifies a major change in the caste system because as Kolenda notes that "purity pollution and hierarchy are all involved in the Jajmani system". Ideally the jajmani system constitutes three categories of people belonging to different castes. These categories are known as jajman, Kamin and Purohit. Kamins and Purohits provide services to jajmans. But they provide different services. Purohits perform rituals and worship deities for jajmans. Kamins perform manual work for jajmans like washing clothes, shaving, cutting and dressing hair, etc. In turn, jajmans pay Purohits in both cash

Explaining Caste in Indian Society and kind and Kamins in kind on a yearly basis which is fixed. Jajmans belong to all castes. Kamins belong to some specific castes. And Purohits are Brahmins.

It has been observed that jajmani system is disintegrating because of various reasons. Firstly, the families belonging to Kamin and Purohit castes who consider their traditional caste occupation less prestigious or non-prestigious and economically less beneficial have abandoned them at the earliest opportunity. They are neither all Brahmin families are Purohits nor all Kamin families are Kamins. There are also a lot of jajmani families who have decided not to avail the services of Kamins. This apart, there is a large variation so far as availing the services of Kamins is concerned. Secondly, as it has already been pointed out there is no caste-based division of labour. Families belonging to the low Kamin castes have taken up occupations which are traditionally supposed to be done by higher-twice born castes, and the other way round, too. There are also instances of non-Brahmin families acting as Purohit families. This phenomenon is more visible in those areas which have felt the impact of anti-Brahminical movements.

Because of such changes the jajmani system no longer denotes a certain kind of relationship between castes but between families. Some of these families are labour buyers and some are wage earners. Their relationship is purely economic. Therefore, caste has ceased to be the primary component of the jajmani system even if it is said that the jajmani system still exists in one form or another.

v) Weakening of the Rules of Purity and Pollution

Increasing dissociation between caste and occupation and the concomitant process of disintegration of the jajmani system have accompanied with the weakening of the rules of purity and pollution. It has been observed that people belonging to various castes hardly observe the rules of purity and pollution while selecting their occupations and interacting with fellow-beings and colleagues. In this respect, they assign profitability of an occupation their top most priority. For a caste it is no longer possible to deny basic conditions of decent living (size, shape and placement of a house, dress materials, style of living, etc.) to a person on the ground of birth in a particular caste. Disappearance of untouchability as a caste practice from the public sphere also denotes the weakening of the rules of purity and pollution.

vi) Breakdown in the Traditional Intercaste Power Relationship

The phenomenon of dominance of one caste over another is one of the most important factors in the maintenance of the caste system. Traditionally, economic and political dominance coincided with ritual dominance. Victims of dominant caste families used to be sheltered by other dominant caste families. This structural arrangement of the caste system has changed to such an extent that it ceases to be a defining feature. The process started with the establishment of British rule. Yogendra Singh writes, "Instances of lower-subject-caste revolts against the upper-dominant-castes even during the Pre-Independence days have been many. In the villages Chanukhera in eastern U.P., the low castes (Chamars and Kahars) agitated against the Kshatriyas for better wages and freedom to participate in Congress movement for Independence, and to this with initial resistance the Kshatriyas finally had to acquiesce" (Singh 1977: 165). Bernard S. Cohn reports a similar case of challenge by a lower-subject-caste (Camars) to the dominance of Kshatriyas in Madhopur village.

F.G. Bailey in his study of Bisipara, a village in Khondamals in Orissa, provides a good example of a structural change in the power relationship of various castes which came in the wake of British rule. He observes that by trading in hides and liquor the 'untouchable' Boad distillers bought land equal to the upper-dominant warrior castes. Similarly, Ganjam distillers by trading in only liquor earned so much money to buy more land than any other caste in the village. These economic changes brought about changes in the political structure of the village altering the balance of inter-caste power relationship.

Activity 2

Discuss with various people the caste dynamics-economic and political. Note down the main points in your notebook.

After Independence change in the configuration of power of castes gained momentum. William L. Rowe, in his study of Senapur, observed, "in the past a small group of economically and politically all powerful Kshatriya landlords quietly (for the most part) directed the society. Now with the social tie of landlord and tenant severed, a numerous and economically able caste community such as the Noniya (a lower caste) feels somewhat free to pursue its own ends independently. About the village Kishan Garhi McKim Marriott also points out a similar process of change.

With breakdown of intercaste power relationship the earlier aspiration of lower-subject castes for Sanskritization has been replaced by a new honoured feeling of self identity within one's own caste or increased horizontal caste solidarity. The position of upper castes as reference group was challenged by differentiating ritual from the politico-economic aspects of caste system. In extreme cases as in D. M. K. or Arya Samaj movements the process of differentiation is absolutized by a conscious and total rejection of the caste ideology. Formation of a caste association with several new functions is a clear reflection of this phenomenon.

vii) Emergence of Caste Association

The nature of a caste association is different, in more than one sense, from caste as such. Organizations like Kayastha Samaj, Kshatriya Sabha, Teli association, Vaishya Mahasabha, Jat Sabha, Kurmi Mahasabha, Koeri Mahasabha, Bhumihar-Brahmin Mahasabha are some of the examples of caste association. Emergence of various castes such as Mahars and Maratha in Maharashtra, Kammas and Reddis in Andhra Pradesh and Lingayat and Okkaliga in Karnataka as political groups can also be cited as examples of caste association.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who developed the concept of Sanskritization?
.....
- 2) Does the concept of Sanskritization bring out dynamic nature of the caste system?
 Yes No
- 3) Who says that the caste system can be defined as a form of differentiation?
.....
- 4) Can the elements of the system of 'difference' be arranged vertically?
 Yes No

The main purpose of a caste association has always been to safeguard the interests of their members by building hostels, hospitals, colleges, schools, houses on a co-operative basis, banks, and by founding journals and endowing scholarships. In their proceedings caste associations claimed backwardness in politico-economic field and a high status in cultural or ritual sphere. Therefore, after Independence caste associations tended to become political pressure groups demanding for their members electoral tickets from the political parties, posts in the cabinet. Licences for undertaking various economic activities, concessions and privileges in education and appointment to government jobs, and a variety of other benefits.

Emergence of castes as pressure group and formation of caste associations clearly indicate the increased activity of caste in the political field. Now castes or caste association play important and pervasive roles in the political processes, especially in various elections and in the matters of distributions of posts in the institutions run by the government

The process of democratization bestows political power and activity upon the groups which have numerical strength provided that strength could be politically mobilized, which is possible if the existential situation of the group as such is homogenous and uniform. These conditions are fulfilled more in the case of lower or subaltern castes. Emergence of lower caste based political parties such as B.S.P., I.P.F., S.P., D.M.K., etc. are some good examples. This apart, launching of movements for more say in the political processes by numerically more powerful low castes in the form of anti-Brahmin movements mark out increasing politicisation of caste.

There is a strong tendency among people to vote for a candidate of one's own caste. Political parties do not ignore this fact. They try their best to put up candidates belonging to the numerically largest castes of the constituency if other conditions remain same. That is why matching a candidate by another candidate of the same caste has been a common policy of political parties in elections.

This apart, caste consideration influence political process in other ways as well. A large group of the Maharashtra Congress constituted by Brahmins formed Peasants and Workers party when they realized that Brahmin control over the Congress party. Kammas decided to control the communist party. That is why Kammas landlords were saved and protected by the Communists even in their violent struggle.

Politicization of castes is so much that in order to be politically powerful distinct caste groups come together and act collectively. Their coming together sometimes take the form of a political party or a faction or a pressure group. B.S.P., S.P., R.J.D., and D.M.K. are some of the examples. In Gujrat Kshatriya Sabha Rajputs admitted a lower caste Kolis to the rank of Kshatriya in order to have a larger say in the power structure of Gujrat state.

Thus, looking back at all that we have been through in this unit, we can conclude that the caste system has always interacted with and responded to economic and political forces of society. Changes in the economic and political structures and processes during the modern period have liquidated many traditional characteristics of the caste system and added new features and functions to it. The picture of caste or caste system that comes out from the above analysis is in consonance with Dipankar Gupta's conceptualisation of caste as discrete category and caste system as a system based on the principle of 'difference'.

20.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, in the first section, we have observed that in order to present a picture of caste dynamics, the ideal typical nature of the caste system should be presented in the first place. It exhibits six defining features: (1) segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy, (3) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, (4) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, (5) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restriction on marriage.

In the second section we have observed that this conceptualization of caste system has been criticised by many scholars. Criticism made by M.N. Srinivas and Dipankar Gupta are the most noteworthy. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization makes it quite clear that the caste system is not a static but dynamic system. Positional change or mobility has always taken place in the caste system. Through the concept of 'difference' Dipankar Gupta argues that the caste system is not based on the principle of hierarchy but on the principle of difference. Castes are discrete categories which cannot be placed on a continuous scale.

In third section we have observed that the caste system has always interacted with and responded to economic and political forces of society. During pre-modern period or before the British rule there were two important forces of change in the caste system: (1) fluidity of the political system, and (2) the availability of marginal land. During modern period the process of modernisation initiated by the introduction of various economic and political policies have brought about significant changes in the caste system. Such as : (1) dissociation between caste and occupation, (2) disintegration in the jajmani system,

(3) weakening of the principles of purity and pollution, (4) breakdown in the inter-caste power relationship, (5) emergence of caste association, and (6) increased activity of caste in political field or politicisation of caste.

20.6 KEY WORDS

Difference	:	It signifies a structure in which the elements of a whole are arranged horizontally and separately like discrete categories.
Endogamy	:	It denotes the rules of marriage which permit or prescribe marriage within one's own caste or a specific group.
Hierarchy	:	It signifies a structure in which the elements of a whole are ranked in vertically linear order on a continuous scale in relation to the whole.
Ideal type	:	It is a general and pure or abstract construct formed by emphasizing aspects of behaviour and institutions which are empirically observable and testable.
Modernization	:	It is a global process by which traditional societies achieved or achieve modernity (liberty, fraternity, and prosperity) in all spheres: economic, political, cultural and social.
Sanskritization	:	It denotes a change in the caste system which is brought about by the imitation of customs, manners, rituals, style of life, ideologies, etc. of the higher-dominant castes by the lower-subject castes.

20.7 FURTHER READINGS

Singh, Yogendra. 1977. *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*. Faridabad: Thomson Press.

Srinivas, M.N. 1981. *India: Social Structure*. Delhi, Hindustan Publishing Corporation.

20.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Louis Dumont
- 2) Yes
- 3) Yes
- 4) No.
- 5) i) Segmental division of society
ii) Hierarchy
iii) Restriction on feeding and social Intercourse
iv) Religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections
v) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation
vi) Restricts on choice of marriage partners.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) M.N. Srinivas
- 2) Yes
- 3) Dipankar Gupta
- 4) No