UNIT 18 DIMENSIONS OF CASTE: RITUALS AND POWER

Structure

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

● Dilineate 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,

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 from 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 weas predominantly used in early studies on India, and how the ideological approach to caste was adopted. But this was essentially a Brahamanical 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 in 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

Check Your Progress 1

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 Brahamans.

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 unsually 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 Brahmans, 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 by 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

(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 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 a 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 treads 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 hierachically 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 on 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

18.8 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 studies 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.