Brahminical Perspective

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the position of Brahmins in society

- explain the Brahminical interpretation of the caste system

- discuss the pattern of interaction between Brahmins and people of other castes.

5.1   Introduction

In the previous unit you learnt about the colonial Perspective on Caste. This unit seeks to explain the viewpoint of Brahmins on the caste system. The Brahmins being experts in conducting and interpreting rituals laid out in the sacred texts emphasised the scriptural and ritual aspects of caste. They quoted chapters and verses from the scriptures and in doing so justified the caste system and their own position in it to a large extent. Interestingly, Brahmins were conversant with Sanskrit language, which is regarded as 'Deva bhasha', or the language of the gods. It is also the language in which incantations in rituals are made. Agreeably, Brahmins who are fluent in the language of the gods treat themselves as superior to the rest of the people. This consolidates their position in society a great deal.

Since the lifestyle and the world-view of the Brahmins including their ideas about the caste system are derived from the scriptures, the Brahminical perspective on caste is, in essence, based on the scriptural dictates and their articulation in the lives of Brahmins[1]. We begin the unit with the traditional theory of the origin of Brahmins and their essential attributes in the larger framework of varna and the jati. Subsequently, we discuss the principle of purity-pollution, which forms the basis of interaction between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and then go on to exploring the inter-dependence of Brahmins and members of other castes in society, which is guided by their occupational specialisation.

5.2   Varna-Jati Theory

The term 'varna' means colour. In the religious texts, the concept of varna is used for grading people. *Rigveda* bears reference to the Arya varna comprising the Aryan people (who were of light complexion) which has been contrasted with the Dasa varna comprising the non-Aryan people (who were of dark complexion).What the *Rigveda* does mention, however, are four

orders in society, Brahma enfolding the priests, Kshatra enfolding the warriors, and Visha enfolding the common people. Ghurye (1950:46) writes, 'These classes or orders are regularly referred to in later literature as varnas, so much so that popularly Hindu religion has come to be defined as 'Varnashrama Dharma'. Yet in the *Rigveda* the word 'varna' is never applied to any of these classes. It is only the Arya varna, or the Aryan People, that is contrasted with the Dasa varna. The *Shatapatha Brahmana*, on the other hand, describes the four classes as the four varnas. 'Varna' means colour, and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the Dasa, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively. The colour-connotation of the word was so strong that later on when the classes came to be regularly described as varnas, four different colours were assigned to the four classes, by which their members were supposed to be distinguished.' In later literature, these orders are referred to as varnas.

One of the later hymns better known as the 'Purushasukta', established that there are four orders in society and that each order has emerged from particular body part of the Purusha — the primeval man as described in the previous unit also. These varnas are, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. It is said that they have emerged from mouth, arms, thighs, and feet of the Purusha. Following the varna scheme, there are only four orders into which people are divided. In addition to the varnas, the vedic literature mentions groups such as Ayogava, Chandala, Nishada, and Paulkasa who lay outside the varna scheme. They were required to perform 'unclean' tasks such as scavenging, were despised and treated as untouchables.

In the *Mahabharata*[2], each varna is associated with a particular colour, Brahmin with white, Kshatriya with red, Vaishya with yellow, and Shudra with black. It was believed that each varna could maintain its purity and its colour by avoiding marriages between people belonging to different varnas. Interestingly, the people of the varna, which was able to retain its purity and colour, gained precedence on the social scale. Largely Brahmins refrained from marrying outside their varna so they were able to maintain their colour and purity. While it may be accepted that normatively the Brahmins did avoid marrying outside their varna, there is no denying that such marriages and/ or associations did take place, though infrequently. The considerations of purity of blood and colour were set-aside on some occasions. The case of Satyakam Jabala (son of a maid servant who could not tell the name of the man from whom she conceived him), Visvamitra (of unknown parentage) loom large in the sacred texts. Furthermore, Ghurye's analysis of anthropometric data (1961) suggests that Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh bear close physical affinity with Churas of the Shudra varna and the Khatris of the Vaishya varna in Punjab.

The division into varnas applies, in addition to people, to planets, even soil. This means that planets, soil are distinguished into four varnas. In the words of Bose (1932:11) "Soils can be recognised by means of certain indications. The Brahman [Brahmin] soil is white in colour. It smells like clarified butter and is astringent to the taste. The Kshatriya soil is blood red in colour, smells like blood and is bitter to taste. The Vichy soil is yellow in colour, smells like alkaline earth and is sour to the taste. The Shudra soil is black in colour,….and has the taste like that of wine." Equally important to note is the classification of people in Indian astrology according to which every person, apart from the varna into which he/she is born, has a varna which is determined by the *rashi* or the sign of the zodiac at the time of birth. It is possible that a

person born into a Brahmin varna has a Vaishya or Shudra varna according to the sign of the zodiac at the time of birth. The varna ascribed by virtue of birth under a particular sign of the zodiac is important in identifying his/her *gunas* (elements or features of quality). In common parlance and in mundane social contexts, the varna of a person refers to the one he/she acquires because of birth and not the sign of the zodiac (See Saraswati, 1977).

Basically there are three *gunas*, *sattva guna* (associated with brightness, intelligence), *rajo guna* (associated with energy, rigorous activity), and *tamo guna* (associated with darkness and inactivity). It is believed that these *gunas* combine different proportions, which brings about variation in behaviour of people. It is stated in the *Gita* that the four varnas were created on the basis of the *gunas* in the sense that *sattva guna* enjoining serenity of mind, self control, forbearance, wisdom, and aptitude for acquiring spiritual knowledge are the attributes of the Brahmins; *rajo guna* enjoining bravery, fury, steadiness, and inclination for acquiring kingship are the attributes of the Kshatriyas; skill to till the land, maintain herds of cattle and other animals for sustenance, trade and commerce are the attributes of the Vaishyas; and *tamo guna* enjoining aptitude for serving others, performing manual work are the attributes of the Shudras (Kane,1962). These also define the duties ascribed to the people of the four varnas in the scriptures. More clearly stated, the Brahmins are ordained to master the sacred texts. According to the *Vishnusmriti* (2-1.17), 'A Brahmin teaches the Veda….A Brahmin sacrifices for others, and receives alms….' The Kshatriyas are ordained to fight in wars and battles and to protect the people of other varnas from enemies. They could also perform administrative and military services. The Vaishyas are ordained to make a living by engaging in trade and merchandise, cultivation of land and breeding of cattle. The Shudras are ordained to serve the people of other castes with modesty and humility. . It is commonly held that *dharma* or righteous action is one, which is in line with the caste rules. Apart from these norms, Manu prescribed activities that people of different varnas could take up in times of crisis. He laid out the following, work for wages, service, rearing cattle, seeking alms, receiving interest on money, among others, as activities that could be undertaken by people of all varnas for subsistence in difficult times. The laws of Manu enshrined in the *Manusmriti* mention that failure of the observance of caste rules leads to dire consequences. Those who digress from the sacred code were relegated a lower position in the social order. The injunctions were more impinging on Brahmins who set standards for others to follow and who sat in judgment over others' performance in society. Notwithstanding the prescriptions in the sacred texts, the laws for adopting an occupation were not always adhered to strictly even by the Brahmins. Instances of departure from the code laid down by Manu are found in the early Buddhist literature. Following the *Brahmnopattimartanda*, there are at least six kinds of degraded Brahmins on the basis of undertaking occupations other than those laid out by Manu, rendering service to the king as personal servants, engaging in trade and selling, making sacrifices for others because of greed for money, acting as priests of the entire village, serving as cooks, and refraining from their daily sacrifice. These Brahmins are like Shudras (see Saraswati,1977).

A Brahmin has the ritual power to ensure the safety of the king through his prayers, offerings and rituals that appease the deities. It is believed that the deities do not accept the offerings from a king till a Brahmin priest mediates the rituals that accompany them. An enraged Brahmin can curse kings and their subjects. There is widespread fear that a Brahmin's curse will come true.

> **Box 5.1: Position of the Brahmin and the King**
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> 'At times the king is above the Brahman, as for example in the royal consecration ceremony. At other times the Brahman appears to be superior to the king, as for example in the Manavadharmasastra, and in passages from the Mahabharata. This conundrum is often addressed in terms of the postulation of two levels of truth, a higher level at which the Brahman is clearly pre-eminent, the source of everything else, and a lower level at which kings must protect and sponsor Brahmans in order for them to exist, as gods, on earth' (cited from Dirks, 1990 :59).

The position of the Brahmin stood out in sharp contrast to that of an untouchable. Now, while the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas like the Brahmins could read the Vedas or hear readings from them, these were required to be taught and explained to them by a spiritual preceptor. The untouchables, on the other hand, were not allowed to hear the Vedas. The Vedas mention that molten lead should be poured into the ears of the untouchables who listen to readings or chanting from them. While the Brahmin was revered, the untouchable was looked down upon and treated with disgust. The untouchables remained marginalized in society to the extent that access to temples, water sources, and other places of social interface with the twice born were denied to them. They were forced to maintain physical and social distance from the rest of the people. They would not be allowed to enter the premises of the twice born. The Brahmins in Tamil Nadu lived in distinct areas called the *agraharams*. They confined most of their activities within the *agraharam*. Surely the non Brahmins, particularly untouchables were not allowed to enter it except for scavenging for which they were instructed to use the back lanes and in a way that they were not seen, neither did their shadow fall on a Brahmin. Untouchables could not wear footwear or keep moustache. If they did grow moustache, they could not twirl them up. The women were not allowed to wear the upper garment. In addition, untouchables were not heard on important matters that concerned everybody in the village including them. They had no say in decisions taken neither about their own affairs nor on issues that were of pertinence to them directly.

Dumont (1988:67) explains, 'The set of four varnas divides into two: the last category of Shudras, is opposed to the block of the first three, whose members are 'twice- born' in the sense that they participate in initiation, second birth, and in the religious life in general. These twice-born, in turn divide into two: the Vaishyas are opposed to the block formed by the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas, which in turn divides into two.' Here, the second birth (first birth being that from the mother's womb) implied in the expression 'twice-born' refers to the initiation ceremony in which men wear the sacred thread for the first time over the left shoulder and across the body. This symbolises the second, and spiritual birth of a person and qualifies him to perform certain rituals, recite certain *mantras* (sacred incantations). The Tamil Brahmin boys, for instance, are encouraged to recite the gayatri mantra (verse invoking the sun god) only after they have undergone the sacred thread ceremony.

In the Pali texts the word, 'jati' is used for caste. It may be noted that the word does not appear in vedic literature. In the *Katyayana Srautasutra* it is used for family. It occurs in the *Nirukta* (X11.13) and in Panini (V.4.9) who explains *brahmanjati* as meaning one who is a Brahmin by caste (see

Kane,1962:1633). Saraswati writes (1977:18), 'Though some authorities (for instance, Yajnavalkya) have clearly pointed out the difference between *jati* and *varna*, many others have used these words synonymously. Manu (X.31) used the word varna for mixed castes, and, often conversely, *jati* for *varna* (V11.177, IX.85-6)'. Manu propounded that children inherit character -types from their parents and that a person adopts the occupation for which he is temperamentally equipped by heredity. Jatis are, in essence, groups sharing an occupation (see Bose 1962). Manu has laid down detailed rules of hypergamous (*anuloma*) marriages and hypogamous (*pratiloma*) marriages. The laws of Manu prescribe that children born out of parents belonging to the same varna are *savarna* meaning 'same varna' while those born out of parents belonging to different varnas are *golaka*. When people belonging to a varna marry those belonging to a higher one repeatedly over five or seven generations only then their varna gets upgraded which means that they are treated as belonging to the higher one. Further, Manu states that jatis originate because of mixed marriages i.e. between people belonging to different varnas. Saraswati (1977:21) states, 'The following law operates consistently in the case of jatis : the children begotten from wedded wives equal in *jati* belong to the *jati* of their fathers, but if the mothers are *bijati* (not of the same jati) then children born of such union are called apasad (base born) and placed under a *jati* which is neither of their fathers nor of their mothers. This is how the various *jatis* have sprung up.' It may be mentioned, however, that children born out of *niyoga* (union for the sake of begetting children) inherit the varna of their mothers and not the biological fathers. Several Brahmin jatis are believed to have been the descendants of sons born out of the mind or the intellectual prowess of the gods. These are the *manasputras*—*manas* means mind and *putra* means son. There are others that have descended from sons born from the body fluids of the gods. There are yet others that have descended from sons born from wedlock and by natural birth. Such births are, however, mediated by divine intervention (see the *Brahmnopattimartanda* for details).

Brahmins are believed to have descended from a sage or seer after whom their *gotra* (an exogamous division the members of which are believed to have agnatically descended from a common ancestor) is named. It is commonly believed that the Brahmins of an earlier generation, like the sages who were their ancestors, were often endowed with *brahmatejas*, a quality which gave to their appearance of a particular glow and serenity (see Beteille, 1996:48).

5.3 The Ideology of Purity-Impurity

The ideology of purity – pollution regulates relationship between different castes significantly. It also provides a basis of hierarchy of castes. Thus, more pure a caste is, the higher is its place in the social hierarchy. The Sanskrit word for purity is *sodhana* It is derived from the root, *sudh* meaning 'pure'. The cognate of *sudh* is *saucha* meaning cleanliness. The Hindu scriptures lay down several means for attaining purity. Spiritual purity comes from studying the Vedas and other sacred texts; meditating on a deity; undertaking pilgrimages; repeating the name of god; practicing continence (*brahmacharya*), asceticism (*tapas*), non-violence (*ahimsa*); and avoiding food (such as onion, garlic, non-vegetarian food) that raise anger, lust, and passions. (see Walker, 1983).

When purity is lost or contaminated (because of, for example, infringement

of some critical caste rules as of a Brahmin who touches an untouchable by accident, or because of birth or death in the family, or any other reason), purification through performance of specific rituals is necessitated. Dumont (1970) situates the contrast between Brahmins and untouchables in the opposition between purity and impurity. For him, the opposition of pure and impure lies at the very root of hierarchy to an extent that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior. He suggests that specialisation in impure tasks in practice or in theory leads to the attribution of permanent impurity to certain categories of people such as the untouchables. The untouchables regularly perform unclean tasks (such as scavenging, washing dirty linen, disposing dead animals and human bodies, making shoes). One example is that of the washermen who, in most parts of the country, clean the soiled linen at the time of birth and menstruation. The other example is that of cobblers who have to use leather (which is an impure material) for making or repairing footwear. Since these are the traditional tasks of the untouchables, they remain perpetually impure. This is permanent impurity. The impurity is contagious in the sense that it gets transmitted to those who touch or are touched by them. The defilement is corrected after performing a prescribed set of rituals. On the other hand, Manu has identified bodily secretions such as excrements, semen, saliva as impure and their presence on the body makes a person impure. In addition, some events as those of birth and death, menstruation, are considered to 'harbour a danger which lends to the temporary seclusion of the affected persons, to prohibitions against contact etc. A person's closest kin often becomes impure, therefore, untouchable for a specific period of time. Touching a menstruating woman or one who is observing taboos after child-birth or a man who has returned from the cremation ground after lighting a funeral pyre all impart temporary impurity. This is temporary impurity. Water is a purificatory agent; bath in running water, better still in sacred water as of the Ganges is particularly efficacious in cleansing impurity.

In order that the Brahmin retain their purity, the untouchables and people of lower castes are believed to absorb the temporary impurity of the Brahmins by cleaning their premises, and their soiled clothes, and performing the tasks that are treated as unclean and impure by them and in the process, become impure themselves. In doing so they ensure that the Brahmins remain in a state to perform rituals and act as intermediaries between gods and people (see Basham, 1954, Hocart, 1950, Gould, 1958). In the broad sense, one of the factors identifying the purity of a caste is whether or not a Brahmin accepts drinking water from the hands of its members. Surely, there are local variations. Hutton (1983) cites the example of Brahmins in north India who take water poured into their own drinking vessels by men of Shudra who are regarded as relatively clean e.g. Barhai (carpenter), Nai (barber), Barbhuja (grain-parcher), Kahar (fisherman, well sinker, and grower of water-nut). Brahmins in south India are extremely particular in this regard. Like water, exchange of food and dining between castes is fraught with several regulations. The glance or the shadow of an untouchable on the cooking pot of a Brahmin is enough to throw away its contents. Interestingly, food cooked in water as by boiling known as *Kachha khana* is subject to more restrictions than *pakka khana* or food cooked in *ghee* or clarified butter. Just as the restrictions on water and food, those on smoking are observed too. At this juncture it may be mentioned that the material of which the cooking utensil is made is of much importance. Hutton (1983) records that the higher caste people does not use earthenware because it cannot be completely clean. Furthermore, pollution can be contracted through bodily contact too.

Orenstein (1965) explains that basically there are two types of pollution an individual may be subjected to, intransitive pollution, and transitive pollution. The intransitive pollution is one which is incurred when a birth or death occurs in the kin group of an individual. On such occasions, defilement is said to spread throughout the kin group. Importantly, kinship assumes importance here. Near relatives stay impure for a longer time than distant ones. What is interesting to note is the belief that the extent of intransitive pollution is proportionate to the level at which the varna is located. This means that higher the rank, lesser is the pollution. Thus a Brahmin gets less intensely polluted than the Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra. Similarly, a Kshatriya gets more polluted than a Brahmin but less polluted than the Vaishya or Shudra. Transitive pollution, on the other hand, is incurred by way of coming in contact with polluted material. It is of two kinds: external pollution and internal pollution. External pollution is that which is acquired by touch or contact with polluted material. It can be removed by cleansing of the polluted person or polluted object. A spoon touched by an untouchable for example, becomes polluted. This pollution can be removed by washing it thoroughly. Similarly, a person who becomes polluted when an untouchable touches him/her has to take a bath in order to remove the pollution and re-gain his/her purity. Internal pollution is that which is acquired when a person consumes polluted foodstuff, polluted water, or any other substance, which gets absorbed in the body.

The criterion of touch or contact as a means of contracting pollution is not as simple as it seems to be. The pertinent question here is, why a washerman is treated as impure and polluted when he goes to the house of a high caste man on the occasion of a marriage but not treated so when he comes to collect dirty cloth or to deliver clean ones. One of the plausible explanations is that he does not pollute the house when he comes to collect dirty clothes or deliver clean clothes because at that time he is an 'agent of purification' (Dumont,1970). On other occasions as that of marriage he is not an agent of purification but a man belonging to an untouchable caste. So he is treated as impure.

If an untouchable pollutes an earthen pot of a person belonging to a higher caste, it has to be replaced. If the same person pollutes a bronze pot, it may be washed scrupulously and need not be replaced. Stevenson (1954) suggests that since the earthen pot is porous it is difficult to purify it by washing. Moreover, it comes cheap so may be replaced easily. The bronze pot, on the other hand, can be washed rigorously; is more expensive so cannot be replaced easily. The people of impure caste are said to pollute the premises of temples by their sheer presence. It is for this reason that they were forbidden to enter the temples and the residential areas of the upper caste people.

Radhakamal Mukerjee proposes the following degrees of social avoidance in ascending order: '(1) against sitting on a common floor; (2) against interdining; (3) against admission in the kitchen; (4) against touching metal pots; (5) against touching earthen pots; (6) against mixing in social festivals; (7) against admittance in the interior of the house; (8) against any kind of physical contact' (cited from Murphy, 1953: 63-64). Hindu conception about purity pollution governing how people interact with and behave towards each other may be consolidated in the following ideas that have been widely drawn from Kolenda(1997).

i) Dietary and Marital Customs

According to Kolenda, one of the basic means of determining the place of a caste group in the ritual rank in its diet and marital customs. It has been found that vegetarianism characterises purer caste. A Brahmin is pure because he/she is a strict vegetarian. This does not, in any way, mean that there are pure castes comprising of those that are vegetarian and impure castes comprising of those that are non-vegetarian. It may be noted that Kolenda's ascription of vegetarianism to Brahmins does not apply universally, for there are fish and meat eating Brahmins in Bengal, Kashmir and in other parts of the country.

Stevenson (1954) identifies the dietary and marital customs an indicative of the ritual status of castes. There are degrees of impurity based on the kind of non-vegetarian food consumed by the people of different castes. It is especially defiling to eat pork and/or beef. He mentions that it is worst to eat beef followed by pork, mutton, chicken and eggs (in this sequence). So castes that eat pork are lower than those who eat mutton, and castes that eat mutton are lower than those who eat chicken. Vegetarian castes are more pure. The next in hierarchy are the castes that eat mutton, chicken and eggs followed by untouchables who eat all these in addition to pork sometimes beef.

So far as martial customs are concerned, high castes are associated with the practice of monogamy. This is particularly stringent for women. Divorce and remarriage, particularly widow re-marriage is not allowed. Men may, however, marry more than once, middle and lower castes are permissive of widow re-marriage. This is, however, not preferred because it lowers the rank of a caste.

ii) Inheritance of pollution

Lower castes are said to suffer from permanent impurity. All the members of a caste inherit the defilement. Stevenson (1954) explains that any waste product from the body is treated as impure; death makes the entire body waste and those who deal with these incur impurity. The barber who deals with hair and nail chippings both waste products of the body is impure. What makes him impure to further extent is his duty to wash the male corpse of his clients while his wife washes the female corpse before cremation. Similarly, the washerman washes dirty clothes, those soiled by bodily excretions; the sweeper removes feaces and filth; he eats from pots and other utensils that have been polluted because of birth or death in the family, he wears the clothes in which a man dies. In effect the barber, washerman, sweeper and other castes are treated as polluted because of the kind of material they handle. Pollution spreads through touch, which means that one who is polluted passes on the pollution to other persons when he/she touches them. This is most explicit when water and/or food are exchanged. A Brahmin, as mentioned earlier does not accept food or water from anyone belonging to a lower caste. He may accept food, which is coated with *ghee* or clarified butter from castes belonging to middle ranks; he may take raw ingredients from anyone because it is believed that fire would purify these in the process of cooking.

iii) Dividual- Particle Theory

Marriot and Inden based their understanding on Hindu writings — Vedas, Brahamanas, Upanishads, classical books of moral and medical sciences, and late medieval moral code books of certain castes in Bengal. It is

believed that these writings reflect the Hindu native models and bespeak of the people's own view of a person as 'individual' which also implies indivisibility into separable portions.

Marriott and Inden (1977) explain the theory of pollution in terms of coded-substance, which is itself, made up of coded particles. These particles (consisting of saliva, sweat, bits and pieces of hair) get exchanged among people through food water etc., in the course of interpersonal interactions. Each *varna* is believed to have received a specific coded substance from the creator and it is only proper that the people maintain or else improve the code and not indulge in anything that would make it inferior. Each person gives off and also receives these coded particles in social interaction. Now, better-coded particles are received from gods and people of higher castes while worse coded particles are received from those belonging to castes lower than one's own. It is suggested that one may get better particles through right eating, right marriage, and other right exchanges and actions. These may get consolidated because the inferior particles are got rid off through excretion etc. Further, they propose that the particles of different kinds separate, combine, and re-combine in different permutations because of the heat in the body which is generated in the process of digestion, sexual intercourse etc. It is for this reason that hot bodily and nutritive substances need to be carefully managed when one is associated with serving or eating warm food. Marriot and Inden maintain that the coded substance may break up into particles that may combine and recombine with each other. This determines the degree of a person's pollution or purity, which suggests that the Hindu view of a person is one, that is dividual (meaning divisible into separable portions).

iv) Guna Theory

The Guna theory of pollution was proposed by Marvin Davis (1976) who was a student of Marriott and Inden. This theory was derived after interviewing the Hindus of West Bengal but it is also mentioned in the sacred books such as *Bhagavada Gita, Srimad Bhagavata Mahaprurana, Purushasukta* and the *Manva Dharamasastra*. According to this theory, the feminine principle called *prakriti* joins with the male matter called *purusha*. The union of *prakriti and purusha* forms three basic materials called *gunas*. The three *gunas* are *sattvaguna, rajoguna* and *tomoguna*. The *sattvaguna* is a white substance, generates goodness and joy and inspires all noble virtues and action; *rajoguna* is red, 'produces egoism, selfishness, violence, jealousy, and ambition; *tamoguna* is black, engenders stupidity, laziness, fear, and all sorts of base behavior.' (Davis,1976:9). The *sattvaguna* may be treated as symbolic of purity while the *tamoguna* may be treated as symbolic of impurity. It is believed that all the *gunas* are present and well balanced in the body of the Brahma while one or the other *guna* predominates among the four varnas. The proportion of *guna* in each *varna* is maintained through the lifestyle, diet, marriage pattern or the inter caste relation. Vegetarian food builds up *sattvaguna*, non-vegetarian food builds up *rajoguna*, and beef, left over food, spoiled food, and alcohol build up *tamoguna*. It is believed that disproportionate admixture of the *tamoguna* with the *sattvaguna* or the *rajoguna* creates, what Stevenson referred to as 'permanent pollution.' Brahmins involved in reciting sacred chants, performing sacrifices, and preaching the scriptures largely have *sattvaguna*. Similarly, untouchables involved in the work of scavenging, tanning, and that which involves dealing with dirt and filth, animal hide, body excretions

largely have *tamoguna,* and Kshatriyas or Vaishyas who are involved in warfare, and activities that sustain life such as cultivation, herding, trading respectively, largely have *rajoguna.*

It may be understood that people of different *varnas* and *jatis* may improve their *guna* through diet, work, and performance of religious rituals, meditation and learning. Another way in which the *guna* may be improved is through marriage. In the words of Davis (1976:16), 'Through activities in accord with *dharma* and through mixing one's own physical nature with that of *sattvik* substances, for example, the defining features of a birth-group are transformed positively and its rank elevated; for in this way individuals of the group and the birth- group as a whole become more cognizant of Brahma and lead a more uplifting, spiritual life.'

5.4 Jajmani System

The mundane relationships between castes are governed by what is known as the 'jajmani system which may be viewed from the standpoint of the day-to-day interactions through which economic values are economically expressed and economic behavior is invested with religious meaning' (Gould,1987:8). The Brahmin performs rituals on different occasions for people of other castes. In return, the Brahmin receives grain or service from those he has obliged. Now, while the rendition of ritual is from the Brahmins to the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, the grain is dispensed in the opposite direction i.e. from the other varnas to the Brahmins.

Box 5.2: Alternative view-point on the Jajmani system

'Fuller's argument presumes, with Heesterman, Pocock, and Dumont, that the prestations made by the dominant cultivators were primarily matters of the 'rights' of the recipients, and not of the ritual functions carried out, through gift- giving, by these donors in their capacity as *jajmans.* More recently, Good(1982) has accepted Pocock's reasons for denying the existence of a 'jajmani system', and goes on to argue that *jajman* and *jajmani* are Hindi terms whose equivalents in the other Indian languages, or at least in Tamil, are not much used and to speak therefore of a 'jajmani system' outside of the Hindi-speaking region is to impose an alien interpretation on the data' (cited from Raheja, 1990:93).

In the jajmani system, the patron is addressed as 'jajman' while the render of the service is addressed as 'kamin'. It is essential that both the Brahmin priest himself as also the place where he performs the service are pure or are purified before the ritual. This can happen when pollution that would otherwise defile a ritual is removed. The only way this is possible is by engaging specialists who perform such tasks as barbering, washing cloths, sweeping and mopping the floor. The pollution is removed or absorbed by those who perform such tasks.

For the kamin, as mentioned earlier, there are 'payments in cash and kind made daily, monthly, biyearly, per piece work, and on special occasions, depending on the type of service rendered and in part on the good will of the jajman' (Wiser, 1936: XXIV). A kamin may serve several twice born patrons within his village and/or those in neighbouring villages. Often his network with the patrons is used for negotiating marital relationships between them. In several villages, the marriage negotiations are conducted through the *nai* or the barber. He is required to find out the economic standing and resources

of the bride's family. Later, when the bride joins her husband after marriage, the barber's wife helps her in adjusting in the husband's house and dealing with his family members amicably.

Gould (1987) mentions that there are several reasons for expansion of jajmani relations beyond the confines of a village. The first reason is that an average village may not contain representatives of all the castes (specialising in different occupations) that participate in the jajmani system. It is, therefore, inevitable to draw the services of specialist(s) from adjoining village(s) when other caste members have not adopted the occupation. The second reason is the initiative of the specialists to expand their clientele with the purpose of raising their income. There is no restriction on the number or the location of clients a specialist may engage in. A specialist may engage with as many patrons as he is able to serve. The third reason is the dissatisfaction of the jajman. If a jajman is not satisfied with the service of the kamin, he may seek another one often from an adjoining hamlet or village. This is because the people of the caste to which the erring kamin belongs may not agree to serve the dissatisfied jajman because of casteist loyalty.

Three attributes of the jajmani system need elaboration. The first attribute of the jajmani system is functional interchangeability. Kolenda (1963) explains that functional interchangeability refers to a situation in which the occupation of a caste is adopted by another one when the specialist caste is absent. This may be explained with the following example. People belonging to the Chamar caste do sweeping. If there is nobody belonging to the Chamar caste in the village, then sweeping is done by people belonging to another caste. This may happen with other castes too. The second attribute of the jajmani system is its temporal continuity. A jajmani relationship lasts over generations. It is inherited from father to sons by both jajmans and kamins. When a joint family divides into nuclear ones, the clients are divided in the same manner as property. This implies that a kamin continues to serve the sons of an old man (who had been his jajman for several decades) even after they have separated and set up different households. Similarly, the sons of a kamin continue to serve the patrons of their father when he is no longer in a position to render service or after he dies. The third attribute of the jajmani system is the interchangeability between the roles of jajman and kamin. Some persons are both jajmans and kamins depending on the context. A person serves one or many jajman(s). An ironsmith, for example, may serve the Brahmin households as a kamin and himself may be a jajman to the washerman and the barber.

The jajmani system defines the basis for the exchange of services between different castes who specialise in different occupations[3]. In doing so it also lays out the pattern of interaction between the different castes. Now, the fundamental assumption here is that members of a particular caste specialise in a specific occupation inherited from their ancestors and which is sanctified in the sacred texts. Gupta (1984) explains that this does not always happen in reality. The sacred texts, however, make mention of only a limited number of *jatis*. The number of *jatis* that exists today far exceeds that mentioned in the sacred texts. What has happened is that there has been much diversification in the occupation of different castes. This means that people of a particular caste who were earlier engaged in only one occupation now specialise in more of them. Brahmins, for example, have taken to cultivation, warfare and even business. In the present day, the *jajmani* system is not operative in its full.

5.5 Emergent Concerns

What is important to note is the fact that the rigidity with which the upper caste people maintained casteist restrictions is on the decline due to several factors. Out of these, at least three seem to be particularly significant. One factor is the increase in mobility of people more so in public transport as trains, buses etc. in which people of several castes are compelled to travel together. Since defilement is so common in such situations that its removal is neither always possible nor convenient. The second factor is the spread of education which dispels superstitions and beliefs in unfounded explanations such as the one that the untouchables are impure by birth and therefore, need to be kept away from. The third factor is the initiatives taken by the government in overcoming untouchability. It is widely popularised that anybody found guilty of practicing untouchability is liable to be punished. Moreover, the government offers reservation in educational and vocational institutions as also jobs in the public sector. In addition, several NGOs are engaged in the endeavour of abolishing untouchability and all kinds of discrimination on the basis of caste. The chief concern is with strengthening the economic and social base of the lower caste people who have remained marginalised and Peripherised in society.

Interestingly, overthrowing the place assigned to them and the sanctions imposed on them in the sacred texts, the people—particularly those belonging to the lower castes aspire to acquire a place in the upper rungs of the caste hierarchy. In order to achieve this, they begin with adopting the customs and lifestyle of the upper castes. M.N. Srinivas coined the term 'sanskritisation' to explain this phenomenon. In the words of Srinivas (1952:32), 'A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism and by sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short it takes over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of Brahmin and the adoption of Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though, theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'sanskritisation'...'A jati sanskritising itself may begin to assert itself as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya over a span of one or two generations. While the lower caste people adopt the lifestyle and code of conduct of the upper caste people, the upper caste people themselves are tremendously influenced by Western thought and Western way of life. This is explained as the process of westernisation.

Joan Mencher (1974) brought out the viewpoint of the lower caste people on the caste system and said that, (i) the caste system does not merely provide every caste with special privileges, rather it leads to and strengthens economic exploitation of the lower castes;(ii) it kept the people in the lower wings of the caste hierarchy so isolated that they could not unite with each other for bringing about change in the system, and improving social and economic condition. On the other hand, the high caste people with greater wealth and political power could readily unite and establish inter-regional communication networks which the lower caste people could not even think of. You will learn more about the view of caste 'from below' i.e. from the point of view of the lower castesim the next unit.

The supremacy of Brahmins in religious, social and political spheres was collectively and systematically challenged by non-Brahmins in the form of a movement. This entailed mass mobilisation of non-Brahmins against Brahmin dominance. The earliest **non-Brahmin movement** was launched in the mid-

nineteenth century in Maharashtra. After that similar movements were initiated in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu 'where laws relating to government service and places in government-run universities have been written to pointedly discriminate against Brahmans' (Kolenda, 1997: 119).

Berreman (1991) has criticised the Brahmanical view of caste which is drawn heavily from classical Sanskrit texts and focuses on ritual hierarchy leading to strict regimentation of society on the following grounds:

i) The Brahminical view takes a position that the people conform to universal values unquestioningly while the truth is that individuals have their own will. They doubt and sometimes defy universal values.

ii) The Brahminical view lays excessive emphasis on ritual hierarchy as the basis of caste organisation undermining the importance of economic and political factors, and power. In real life situations it is neither appropriate nor possible to delineate singular basis (such as ritual hierarchy as done by Dumont) for caste ranking.

iii) The Brahminical view dismisses any scope of cross-cultural comparison of caste system in India. While it needs to be accepted that caste in India is indeed unique, it is not correct to safeguard it from comparison with similar forms of gradation in other cultures.

iv) The Brahminical view is based on sacred Sanskrit texts. These texts are, in fact, biased and of limited scope. The perspective that emerges from them, therefore, presents caste as rigid, stiff, stereotyped, and idealized construct.

People at the grass-roots, however, maintain that this perspective is far from reality. Dumont does not take note of the numerous social and political movements in Indian history that sought to overthrow the burden of caste[4]. He does, however, refer to Bhakti movements but notes that they are not able to make any significant impact on caste hierarchy. Most people, especially those belonging to lower castes concede that the Brahminical perspective holds good for the high castes only and does not have a bearing with their own lives. They maintain that it has provided legitimisation of the high handedness and dominance of the Brahmins. More significantly, the subaltern view, among others, the distinct dalit perspective (which is greatly influenced by Ambedkar, Lohia and others) provides an alternative interpretation of the sacred texts and their position on the caste system. Notwithstanding the criticism, the Brahmanical perspective has been a significant component of studies on caste system in academic circles. It has been hotly discussed and debated upon by sociologists, social anthropologists and other social scientists alike.

5.6 Conclusion

We have noted that Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. Brahmins, in effect, draw legitimisation of their position from Hindu religious texts. These texts bestow a degree of sacredness to all that they say and do. It is equally true that the Brahmin is not a monolithic, uniform category. The Brahmins are themselves grouped into hierarchical groups based on the nature of their engagement. Those who, accept *pratigraha* or offerings at centers of pilgrimages (better known as *pandas* in

north India and *pandarams* in south India) as the Maithil and Bengali Brahmins of Deoghar, Chaubes of Mathura, Dikshattars of Tamil Nadu and others; accept food and *pratigraha* in mortuary rites and/or at the time of sickness as the Sawalakhi Brahmins of Varanasi, Bhattas of Punjab and others; keep genealogies as the Hakaparas of Bihar and others; and practice agriculture or perform act as cooks or the Tyagi of western Uttar Pradesh are treated as degraded Brahmins (see Saraswati,1977).

Quintessentially the Brahminical perspective on caste as mentioned earlier, is largely drawn from the sacred texts in that it focuses on the principles and ideas that provide the basis on which, ideally, the rituals and conduct of the Brahmins has to be organised. It is in the unceasing flux between the textual constructs and their practice that the dynamism is contained. These principles and ideas that are interpreted and articulated in myriad of ways that make for local variations and yet make for the identity of the Brahmin as a social group.

Notes (comments of the editor)

1. There is an implicit assumption that the Brahminical view is the view expressed by the Brahmins in the scriptural texts. Since this is the most popular view, we accept it in this unit even as we find it necessary to interrogate the issue.

2. There is a need to question the widespread view that *Mahabharata* is a Brahminical text.

3. It ignores the relations of production in agriculture.

4. It is not appropriate to equate Dumont with Brahminical view.

5.7 Further Reading

Dumont,L.,1988 *Homo Hierachicus*: *The Caste System and its Implications.* Oxford University Press: Delhi

Ghurye,G.S.,1950, *Caste and Race in India,* Popular Prakashan, Bombay

Kolenda,P.,1997, *Caste in Contemporary India: Betond Organic Solidarity,* Rawat Publications. Jaipur

Saraswati,B.N.,1977, *Brahmanic Ritual Traditions.* Indian Institute of Advanced Study: Simla

Unit 6
View from the Field

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- distinguish between book-view and field-view of caste
- identify the operative aspects of castes in different societies
- discuss recent changes in the caste system.

6.1 Introduction

Field-view or the view from the field refers to an orientation to the experiences of people, with their inner tensions and contradictions which one seeks to understand and interpret (Beteille, 1997). In fact, Srinivas proposed the distinction between the 'book-view' and the 'field-view' of Indian society. He maintained that there is a book-view of every major institution: of castes, of joint family, and of village community. Accounts based on fieldwork reveal a distinct departure from accounts drawn from the texts. The book-view of the caste system upholds the superior position of Brahmins in the social hierarchy while the untouchables occupy the lowest rungs. There is strict restriction on commensality and mobility. More importantly, the book-view is projected as uncontestable and immutable. View from the field particularly in the context of caste situation, brings out lived reality of the people, the articulation of what is contained in the scriptural texts in real life situations Here, social mobility assumes importance. Further, accounts base on fieldwork reveal a distinct departure from accounts drawn from texts in the sense that the latter bring out the actual working of the caste system at the grassroots.

This unit focuses on the operation of caste at the grass roots. In doing this it takes a departure from the earlier unit on the Brahminical perspective on caste that dealt with ideas about caste contained in the sacred texts. Here we will explore how caste system works in different societies by reviewing some field based studies.

6.2 An Overview of Caste Situation in Different Societies

Many sociologists and anthropologists have tried to analyse the basic tenets of caste system on the basis of their experience in the field. All of them have found new dimensions of caste that were either not present in the book-view of the caste system or was not specifically highlighted by the authors.

Srinivas adds a significant dimension to field-based studies of caste system

in proposing the concepts of sanskritisation and dominant caste. Sanskritisation is the, **"process by which a low caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, rituals beliefs, ideology, and style of life of a high and in particular 'twice-born' (dwija) caste. The Sanskritisation of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the caste hierarchy"** (Srinivas, 1989:56). The other concept that assumes importance in the field-view of caste is that of dominant caste which he explains is one which is numerically preponderant and wields economic and political power. What is important to note is that ritual status does not necessarily determine dominance of a caste group over others.

Box 6.1: Sanskritisation and Westernisation

"The idea of hierarchy is central to caste. The customs, rites and way of life were different among the higher and lower castes. The dominant caste punished those who encroached on forbidden ground, but the process could not be stopped. This adoption of the symbols of higher status has been celled Sanskritisation. The Lingayats of Mysore Sanskritised their way of life over eight centuries ago. In recent times, Sanskritisation has been widespread both spatially as well as structurally. The Ilavans of Kerala, the Smiths of South India, the Ramgharias of Punjab, the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh and many other castes have all tried to sanskritise their way of life. Liquor and forbidden meals are given up. Sanskritic ritual is increasingly adopted and there is an increasing demand for the services of a Brahmin priest at wedding, birth, funeral rites and *sraddha*.

On the other hand, the higher castes, especially those living in the bigger cities, are undergoing a process of Westernisation. Westernisation, like Sanskritisation, is a blanket term: it includes Western education as well as the adoption of Western ways of life and outlook. It also implies a degree of secularisation and rationalism, and in these two respects it stands opposed to Sanskritisation. In certain other respects, Westernisation helps to spread sanskritisation through the products of its technology — newspapers, radios and films.

In some exceptional cases, the lower castes and tribes are being Westernised without undergoing a prior process of Sanskritisation. Again, Sanskritisation occurs generally as part of the process of the upward movement of castes while Westernisation has no such association. In fact, unlike Sanskritisation, Westernisation is more commonly an individual or family phenomenon and not a caste phenomenon, though some groups (Kodagus) and some areas (Punjab) may be said to be more Westernised than the others. Again, some groups may be more Westernised in the sense that they are highly educated, whereas some others may be Westernised in their dress, food habits and recreation" (Srinivas, 1980:77-78).

Mencher analyses the caste system from bottom-up approach on the basis of fieldwork among 'untouchables' in Tamil Nadu. She argues that the functionality of the caste system is only for those castes that enjoy the privileges. On the other hand, the caste located at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy suffers from economic and social exploitation. She reveals that there has been a protest from the castes located at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, sometimes explicitly other times tacitly. But the fact of the matter is that these protests were not recorded so they do not constitute

significant part of historical evidence. One of the reasons why this happened was because the untouchables could never gather enough courage to lodge their complaint against the so-called upper castes, as they were economically dependent on them.

In a study of Jatavs of Agra, Lynch (1974) has highlighted the fact that the Jatavs who once wanted to sanskritise, rejected the complete process of sanskritisation when they got other avenues of mobility. These avenues, he argues, have been thrown open by the process of parliamentary democracy, and possibilities of political participation of the Jatavs. In this context the Jatavs, hitherto untouchables, with stigmatised identity have taken refuge in the democratic constitution of the social fabric in independent India. They assert their right on the basis of equality and argue for provision of equality of opportunity. The Jatavs formed secular association instead of traditional panchayats. They also contested elections by forming political parties and thereby tried to enhance their social status. They also attained political and economic powers that were denied to them in the traditional caste system.

In another case, Singh (1994:55) discussing patterns of sanskritisation reveals another fact about the rejection of traditional caste hierarchy by the hitherto untouchables. In his words, "The third pattern in Sanskritisation is even more important from a sociological point of view. Sanskritisation in such cases takes place through increased Puritanism and traditionalism in a caste along with rejection of the superiority of the 'twice born' castes." Certain casts of eastern Uttar Pradesh refused to accept water even from the Brahmins, considering them less pure than themselves. Similarly, in many other untouchable castes, the process of Sanskritisation includes the rejection of some models of book-view of caste system'. In this regard Cohn (1955:215) writes:

"Literacy has enabled the Chamars to relate to aspects of the Hindu Great tradition, through reading stories available in vernacular books. Urban employment has enabled Chamars to participate in rituals, derived from the Hindu Great tradition, at low caste temple in the cities. Simultaneously, there continues an earlier movement, the Siva Narayan sect, whose goal was Sanskritisation. Another strand is represented by the celebration of Rai Das birthday, which now is in hands of Chamar college students, who are, among other things, using political action. Their stories about Rai Das have an anti-Brahmin tint to them and they stress right action and right principles rather than the more orthodox activities, worship and rituals". Another aspect that deserves mention is the protest of the non–Brahmin communities against the domination of Brahmins in different parts of the country. The apical position accorded to the Brahmins in the sacred texts was challenged.

Further, we have noted that the caste system has often been considered a system which is maintained rigidly through the practice of endogamy and the ideology of purity-pollution ignoring conflict of power and privileges. The field-view of caste has, however, revealed that the caste system was (and is in the present day too) much influenced by political and economic factors. The study of Nadars of Tamil Nadu is a case in point. Defining the importance of caste in Indian politics, Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) reveal that political clout can be used to change even the status in the caste hierarchy and many rights can be acquired which were once denied to a caste. They took the case of an untouchable community i.e. Shanans of

Tamil Nadu and explained how it could change the social status with the help of political mobilisation and association. In their words, **"In 1921, the Shanans succeeded in officially changing their name. Their metamorphosis was wrought neither by the institutions of traditional society nor by findings of the legal system, of the British state customs or the sacred texts of traditional society justified shanan claims. It was government of Madras that wrought this important symbolic change, and its reasons for doing so were in considerable measure political. Nadars (as they were later on called) had brought increasing political pressure to bear on government to recognise the changes in self and social esteem resulting from a century of social change and mobility "** (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987:45).

Box 6.2: Pollution Rules

"Pollution rules are much less strictly observed in cities than in villages. In fact, in certain areas of urban life pollution has ceased to have any application. People mix freely in factories and schools, and very few bother about the caste of fellow-passengers in train and buses. In cities pollution is being increasingly confined to the house, to women and to ritual occasions

In older days the higher castes regarded contact with the lower castes as polluting, and the latter were also subjected to some disabilities. For instance, the lower castes were not allowed to build tiled houses, wear the clothes that the upper castes wore or take out wedding processions in streets inhabited by high castes. Punishment for an offence varied according to the caste of the persons who committed it and against whom it was committed. Mahatma Gandhi roused the conscience of educated Indians about the practice of untouchability. Apart from the injustice, educated Indians realised the political dangers of trying to deny basic conditions of decent living to large numbers of people on the ground of birth in a particular caste. It is this awareness that has led to the adoption of various measures in independent India to put an end to untouchability and to enable the scheduled castes and tribes to advance to the level of the high castes. The grosser expression of untouchability have disappeared in the cities, but in rural areas it still holds sway. The economic emancipation of the Harijans and their increased migration to urban areas are necessary for the complete eradication of untouchability**"** (Srinivas, 1980:78-79).

The caste system in its traditional form has undergone tremendous change because of politicisation. In the domain of politics, both caste and kin seek to establish new identities and strive for enviable positions. Politicians find caste groupings readily available for political mobilisation. Kothari (1970) explains that, traditionally, there were two aspects of the secular organisation of caste: the governmental aspect which included caste councils, village arbitration procedures and so on; and the political aspect which included the intra-caste and inter-caste authority and status alignments and cleavages. These were dispensed through authority relationships of the local elites and the central political system(s). In the present day, electoral and party politics assume tremendous importance. There is continuous co-option of more and more strata in political-decision making processes. In some regions the Brahmins got involved readily, in others particularly where the Brahmins were not dominant, certain agricultural upper castes got involved

According to the dalits, the caste system was framed by the Aryans to subjugate them. They say that since the Aryans were few in number and,

needed to control the indigenous people i.e., the dalits who were egalitarian, they devised the caste system. Various caste movements as the Adi-Dravid, were led by this ideology (Omvet, 1994). Dalits assert that their conversion to different religions –Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity introduced the element of caste in them too. Later the dalit leaders mobilised the untouchables and Shudras (who constitute the Dalit and other backward classes category in contemporary times) under the banner of majority-minority communities. They argue that the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas constitute only 15 per cent of the population, hence they are in minority to Dalits who constitute the remaining population.

6.3 Field Based Studies

The field-view of caste comes out most clearly from studies at the grass roots by sociologists and social anthropologists. Further, in specific terms the field view localises our understanding of caste and makes the researcher aware about the historical forces operating in the particular village or region down the ages. The field view also equips the researcher to take into account the internal factions within the caste. A researcher can observe everyday interaction between various castes in a village in economic, political and socio-religious spheres in a field situation and then develop a holistic framework for exploring the social status and mobility of different castes.

What follows now are specific, field based studies that bring to light the working of the caste system in the lives of people. Let us turn to a detailed study of some important aspects of field-view with specific examples. Here we have tried to evaluate the analysis of caste undertaken F. G. Bailey, Adrian C. Mayer, McKim Marriott, and O.M. Lynch. The contribution made by these authors is significant because their understanding of caste is based on field view. This means they have tried to look at the caste system in India in operational terms. All the scholars have closely observed and recorded the intra/inter-caste interactions in the villages/regions of their studies and have discussed the implications of such an inter-caste interaction for the ranking of castes in the hierarchy. Nevertheless, they vary in their emphasis and focus of study.

a) Kishangarhi Village in Aligarh

In the village of Kishangarhi located in Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, McKim Marriott set out to study the nature of social hierarchy. The village was one with people belonging to different castes, practicing different occupations. Interestingly, all the people did not give the same rank order to castes. Again, there was disparity between the rank ascribed to a caste in the scriptures and that ascribed to it by the people. What this means is that, the castes did not seem to derive their position in the social hierarchy from the highness or lowness of their attributes. In fact some of the attributes such as diet and occupational restrictions were not determinate in ascription of rank to a caste. This stood out in contrast to the emphasis on the two attributes in the texts. He found that the categorisation of food into *pucca* and *kuchha* and its acceptance from those equal in caste rank or refusal from those lower in caste rank was not a sufficient criterion of determining the position of a caste in the hierarchy. In the Kishangarhi village itself the vegetarian castes (as the washerman i.e., Dhobi) and the non- vegetarian caste (as the leather workers i.e., Chamar) occupied the same position in the caste hierarchy.

Marriott found that in relation to the occupational hierarchy or ranking of castes on the basis of purity of occupations, the placement of castes did not follow from the highness or lowness of occupation. Thus, those castes that followed clean occupations were ranked differently; the carpenter was higher than the gardener who was considered higher than the cultivator and so on. The barber, shepherd and several others were, however, placed on the same level of the local hierarchy.

Other scholars note that, castes following clean and pure occupations and food habits are often ranked below those castes that follow the less pure or more polluting occupations. In a Mysore village studied by Srinivas, for example, there were both vegetarian and non-vegetarian castes, and castes following both clean and unclean occupations. The trader's caste is both a vegetarian and follows a clean occupation as compared to other castes such as the peasants. But castes such as the peasants rank above the traders. This shows a discrepancy between the attributes of the caste and its rank.

It is found that a caste may follow a pure occupation and be non-vegetarian or an impure occupation and be vegetarian. Thus both the castes combine the pure and impure attributes. In such a caste, determination of rank is not easy. A caste often consists of an admixture of attributes that are treated as pure and those that are treated as impure. Often, a caste cannot be said to be completely pure or completely impure. Take for instance the case of Brahmins in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. According to the book-view of the caste system, the Brahmins practice pure occupations, such as priesthood, observe purity of diet i.e. strict vegetarianism and teetotalism (i.e., avoidance of alcohol) and, among other reasons, because of these attributes they occupy the highest rank in the hierarchy. But, when we take the example of the Brahmins of Kashmir, Bengal and several other regions we find that they are non-vegetarians and in spite of such dietary habits they continue to occupy important social position in the caste hierarchy. The book-view remains silent on the question of vegetarianism and nature of occupation as being sufficient criteria for determining the position of a caste in social hierarchy neither does it take note of the different permutations in which the attributes combine and recombine in actual lives.

Just as Marriott (1955) found in his village study that castes having the same attributes of diet and occupation, often get ranked differently, F.G. Bailey (1957) in his study of village Bisipara in Orissa, points out how there are many castes in the village each of which is non-vegetarian yet they are ranked differently by the villagers.

b) Caste in Bisipara Village of Orissa

Bailey studied the Bisipara village of Orissa which had several caste groups represented by different population size that varied from one person to 150 people said that caste groups are united into a system through two principles namely segregation and hierarchy. "Castes", according to Bailey (1963:123), "stand in a ritual and secular (political, economic) hierarchy expressed in rules of interaction." Here Bailey sees the caste system as a dynamic one in which different castes are held together by the power of dominant caste. According to him, the component of ritual status of a caste group goes hand-in-hand with the political and economic status. The relationship between castes is simply based on practice of rituals. The concern is with

power because, many castes are subordinate to the dominant caste. In fact, the caste system is held together because of the concentration of power (and force) in the hands of the dominant caste. Since ritual rank is always consistent with political and economic status, once a caste becomes wealthy it changes its pattern of interaction with other castes so that it may claim a higher rank in hierarchy. In other words, a caste's rank in the hierarchy is expressed through its pattern of interaction with the other castes. Here, the pattern of interaction becomes an indicator of its ritual status in the hierarchy. The pattern of interaction includes the acceptance and distribution of food; acceptance of water; willingness to smoke together and/ or to sit together may also be treated as an indicator of pattern of interaction. Exchange of gift is included in the list. Bailey also talks about the interaction between people of same caste spread over different villages in the region. A caste spread over a particular region may come together and strengthen ties through marriage. When this region-wide relationship matures, the caste may strive for power in the political sphere. Bailey explains the aforesaid issue by looking at inter-caste interaction in Bisipara.

Box 6.3: Recent Changes

"Dr. Bailey's study, *Caste and The Economic Frontier* (1958), provides a good example of kind of changes which came in the wake of British rule. In Bisipara, a village in Khondmals in Orissa, two non-landowning castes made money because they could get a monopoly of the profitable trade in hides and liquor. It would have been polluting for the higher castes to handle liquor or hides. Of the two castes one was able to raise itself up in the hierarchy by Sanskritising its ritual and way of life; the other, found that untouchability came in the way of its mobility" (Srinivas, 1986:76).

According to Bailey, generally speaking, in the upper and lower extremes of the hierarchy, one can find perfect correspondence between ritual, political and economic status. In Bisipara, the warriors stood at the top of the caste ritual hierarchy next only to a sole Brahmin family in the village. But in the secular hierarchy consisting of political and economic statuses, warriors were the dominant caste. They owned a large part of the land and dominated the village council. But what happened after the change that swept Bisipara in the post-independence period is more important to note from the vantage point of field-view of caste system. After experiencing the winds of change, the warriors' position came to be ambiguous in the ritual hierarchy because they lost much of their land. Moreover, the merchant caste as well as the distiller caste people came to claim a position next to that of Brahmins. None of these castes would accept food or water from one another anymore. Thus, conflict developed between the distillers and the warriors regarding their position in the ritual hierarchy.

Warriors like the Brahmins, accepted water from the herdsmen caste but not from the distillers. Thus implicitly, the warriors placed the distillers below herdsmen in the ritual hierarchy. The herdsmen, accepted food and water from warriors but refused it from the distillers. The distillers now reacted by accepting food and water only from the Brahmins and no one else. Thus, distillers of Bisipara claimed for themselves a position next to the Brahmins, after attaining wealth and weakening of the economic status of warriors. The Bisipara case of distillers reveals that whenever there is an improvement in political and economic status, castes tend to change their pattern of

interaction only to claim a higher rank in the ritual hierarchy. This is contrary to the book-view that assigns a fixed ritual hierarchy for all the times with Brahmins at the top and the Shudras at the bottom.

Reflection and Action 6.1

Discuss the major factors bringing about change in inter-caste relations.

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c) Caste in Ramkheri Village in Madhya Pradesh

Ramkheri village is situated near a small town by the name of Dewas, in Madhya Pradesh. Ramkheri had twenty-five Hindu and two Muslim castes. Commensal relations were strictly regulated, though flexibility was possible occasionally. To understand the hierarchy of commensal relations, Mayer observed the following:

i) type of activity: eating, drinking water, smoking

ii) type of food: *pacca* food, *kaccha* food

iii) the place and context of eating: wedding or mourning

iv) who is seated next to whom while eating?

v) who provides the food? who cooks the food?

vi) in what vessel is water given, brass or earthen pot?

Mayer projects the village as a concrete reality affecting human relationships. It is from the interaction between the various castes in a village that a hierarchy of caste emerges. (See unit of ESO-12 of B.A. Programme) Mayer analyses inter-caste relations and their relation with the unity of the village. Mayer identifies economic and political interaction and more importantly, commensality (inter-dining) as the factors, which determine caste hierarchy in the village.

According to Mayer (1970), it is difficult to measure the ranks on the economic and political basis of caste ranking. The problem with economic and political factors is that, all members may not come together or have interaction in the economic and political sphere. It is also a fact that economic wealth may cut across caste divisions. In other words, a person of a 'high' caste may have a poor economic status and vice versa. These problems are resolved in the context of ritual status. Ritual status in the caste hierarchy uniformly applies to everyone in the caste. Even in the patterns of interaction, it is only the 'commensal hierarchy' that can give an intricate system of relations between castes. In the words of Mayer (1970:59), "The ranking of castes is nowhere more clearly seen than in the commensal rules of eating, drinking and smoking". Caste hierarchy is not determined solely by economic and political factors, although these are important. For him, the single most important factor is commensality, which clearly indicates the hierarchy prevalent in the village.

It is a fact that, "The commensal hierarchy is based on the theory that each caste has certain quality of ritual purity which is lessened, or polluted by certain commensal contacts with castes having inferior quality"(Mayer, 1970: 33). Hence, a superior caste does not eat from the cooking vessels or the hands of a caste that it regards as inferior, nor will its members sit next to the inferior people in the same unbroken line (*pangat*) when eating. Drinking and smoking follow similar rules of exclusion. According to Mayer, "The position

of a caste on the commensal hierarchy can be assessed on the principle that eating the food cooked or served by another caste denotes equality with or inferiority and that not to eat denotes equality and superiority… To put it another way, those from whom all will eat are higher than those from whom none will eat" (Mayer, 1970:34).

Mayer explains, that the Brahmins come first in the undisputed position. The Brahmins of Ramkheri village eat *kaccha* food cooked only by members of their own caste or sub-caste. All the other castes accept the food cooked by the Brahmins and drink freely from their earthen pots. Moreover, according to Mayer, next to the Brahmin in the hierarchy are two groups of castes, one group is vegetarian while the other is non- vegetarian. Rajputs eat non-vegetarian food, but consider barbers and the potters as inferior because they accept kaccha food from the inferior carpenter or farmer. The dairymen of Ramkheri accept *kaccha* food only from the Brahmins but from no other caste. Only some most inferior castes (weaver, tanner, sweeper) accept food from them. In a similar way, oil-pressers of Ramkheri are ranked slightly above the dairymen, because at least a few castes above them eat from them. Carpenter, gardener, smith, farmer and tailor castes accept *kaccha* food only from the Brahmins. Carpenter is placed high because he eats only from the Brahmins and the farmer is placed lower than carpenter because he accepts food from Rajputs and potters as well.

Still lower in the hierarchy are the bhilala, mina, nath and drummer. None of these castes accept *kaccha* food from each other. Weavers, tanners and sweepers are at the lowest order of the hierarchy. Sweeper is considered to be the lowliest of all castes in Ramkheri village because he alone eats the left-over from the plates of other castes. Now from the above description of caste hierarchies it becomes clear that the commensal relations in Ramkheri village indicate and express the ritual status of various caste groups. The other indicators of hierarchy as emphasised in the sacred scriptures have been rendered inconsequential.

Reflection and Action 6.2

Discuss how the book-view of caste differs from the field-view of caste. Illustrate your answer with suitable examples.

6.4 Conclusion

We have come to realise that the caste situation at the grass roots presents several dimensions that are not contained in the sacred scriptures. The view from the field lays emphasis on the secular, day-to-day interactions between people belonging to different castes and among people belonging to the same caste. Now, while the texts classify people into four varnas (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) based on a theory of their origin from different parts of the body of the creator (later the fifth varna comprising those presently known as 'untouchables', harijans' was added) at ground-reality, there are several jatis or castes based on occupation. The book-view of caste was a rigid and closed system with negligible scope for social mobility. The thrust was on rituals, hierarchy based on purity-impurity. Surely, then caste emerged as a static entity. It may be safely concluded that the 'book-view' of caste gives us only partial reality of the structure and functioning of the caste system in India. It gives a normative and prescriptive order that does not work in all situations. It can also be ascertained from the above

that the normative principles enshrined in the sacred texts on the basis of which most of the notions of book view of caste are carved for individuals and groups are governed by different principles in a given geographical and socio-political situation. The field situation is plagued with social change and conflict. It also points to the possibility of an alternate way of explaining caste.

The field view brings to light the dynamics of caste relations in which the element of ritual does not remain excessively significant. Wealth and power rather ritual assume greater importance and determine and social hierarchy. Dominant caste (defined by Srinivas as one which preponderates numerically over the other castes, and wields preponderant economic and political power) governs inter-caste relations. Education and constitutional provisions for the backward caste have had a profound impact on the operative aspect of the caste system. There is fuzziness of hierarchy in the caste occupying the middle rungs.

6.5 Further Reading

Lynch, Owen, M., 1974 *The Politics of Untouchability*. National Publishing House, Delhi

Mayer, Adrian, C, 1970 *Caste & Kinship in Central India: A Village and its Region*, University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles

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Ambedkar and Lohia on Caste

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to explain

▫ Ambedkar's interpretation of the Varna theory

▫ dysfunctional aspects of the caste system

▫ annihilation of caste from the perspective of Ambedkar and Lohia.

7.1   Introduction

Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891- 1956) was a Dalit who assumed the role of social, political, and spiritual leader first for the Dalits and subsequently for the whole nation. He gave the country a democratic constitution; as a spiritual leader he revived the legacy of Buddha. On the other hand, Ram Manohar Lohia (1910-1967) — a socialist by ideology championed the cause of the disadvantaged of India including minorities and women. Ambedkar and Lohia identified the caste system as degenerate in Indian society and wanted to annihilate it. That is why towards the fag end of his life Ambedkar was in touch with Lohia exchanging views through letters. In fact both of them wanted to launch a political party with scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, women and minorities at their base constituency.

This unit consists of views of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia on the caste system in Indian society. It starts with a brief introduction to Ambedkar's interpretation of Hindu social order based on the varna theory and goes on to explore his vision on genesis, and spread of caste system. The unit presents the views of Ambedkar on caste consciousness and its dysfunctional aspect. It also deals with the ideas of Ram Manohar Lohia on the dysfunctional aspects of the caste system and his vision to annihilate it.

7.2   Ambedkar on Caste

Ambedkar drew attention to the rigidity of the caste system and its essential features. He argued that the principle of graded inequality as a fundamental principle is beyond controversy. The four classes are not only different but also unequal in status, one stands above the other. In the scheme of Manu, the Brahmin occupies at the uppermost rank followed by the Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Below the Shudra is the Untouchable. This principle regulates many spheres of life. An officer distributing money and/or other relief material to famine-stricken people, for example would give a larger share to a person of high birth than he would to a person of low birth. The Hindu social order does not recognise equal need, equal work or equal ability as the basis of reward for labour. It favors the distribution of the good things of life among those who are reckoned as the highest in the social hierarchy.

The second principle on which the Hindu social order is founded is that of prescribed graded occupations that are inherited from father to son for each class. The third feature of the Hindu social order according to Ambedkar is the confinement of interaction of people to their respective classes. In the Hindu social order there is restriction on inter-dining and inter-marriages between people of different classes. According to Ambedkar there is nothing strange or peculiar that the Hindu social order recognises classes. There are classes everywhere and no society exists without them even a free social order will not be able to get rid of the classes completely. A free social order, however, aims to prevent isolation and exclusiveness because both make the members of the class inimical towards one another (Ambedkar, 1987: 113).

a) Interpretation of Varna Theory

Ambedkar recognised the existence of four varnas in the Hindu social order. He emphasised that the Hindu social order is primarily based on the class or varna and not on individuals. He opined that the unit of Hindu society is not the individual Brahmin, or the individual, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, or the 'Untouchables'. Even the family is not regarded in the Hindu social order as a unit of society except for the purposes of marriage and inheritance. The unit of Hindu society is the class or varna. In the Hindu social order, there is no room for individual merit and no consideration of individual justice. If a person has a privilege it is not because it is due to him/her as an individual. The privilege goes with the class, and if he/she is found to enjoy it, it is because he/she belongs to that class. Conversely, an individual suffers not because he/she deserves it by virtue of his/her conduct; rather it is because he/she belongs to that class.

Ambedkar analysed the impact of the division of the society into varnas on the Hindu social order. He argued that because of this division the Hindu social order has failed to uphold liberty, equality and fraternity — the three essentials of a free social order. The Hindus do believe that god created different classes of people from different parts of his divine body. According to Ambedkar, (1987:100) "The doctrine that the different classes were created from different parts of the divine body has generated the belief that it must be divine will that they should remain separate and distinct. It is this belief which has created in the Hindu an instinct to be different, to be separate and to be distinct from the rest of his fellow Hindus". In the same vein Ambedkar adds, "The most extensive and wild manifestation of this sprit of isolation and separation is of course of the caste-system... Originally, there were four only. Today, how many are there? It is estimated that the total is not less than 2000. It must be 3000... Castes are divided into sub-castes." (Ambedkar, 1987: 102)." The question that Ambedkar raised is, "What fraternity can there be in a social order based upon such sentiments?"

Ambedkar asks, 'Does the Hindu Social Order recognise equality?' He says that while the Hindu social order accepts that men have come from the body of the Creator of the Universe, it does not treat them as equal because they were created from the different parts of his body that are themselves graded in terms of perceived importance and location. The Brahmins were created from the mouth, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from the feet. Ambedkar agrees that it is a fact that men were not equal in their character and natural endowments, he opined that the Hindu social order, "refuses to recognise that men no matter how profoundly they differ as individuals in capacity and character, are equally

entitled as human beings to consideration and respect and that the well-being of a society is likely to be increased if it plans its organisation that, whether their powers are great or small, all its members may be equally enabled to make the best of such powers as they possess" (Ambedkar, 1987:106). It is for this reason that he feels that the Hindu social order is against the "equalitarian temper" and does not allow equality of circumstances, institutions and lifestyle to develop.

In the same context, Ambedkar upholds that there is absence of liberty specifically 'liberty of action' in the Hindu social order because the occupation and status of the individuals are all fixed on the basis of their birth in a particular family. The same is true for political liberty too. The Hindu social order does not recognise the necessity of a representative government chosen by the people. According to him, though the Hindu social order does recognise that laws must govern the people, it negates the idea that the laws can be made by the representatives chosen by the people. Ambedkar submits that, the Hindus are of the opinion that the law by which people are to be governed already exist in the Vedas and no human being is empowered to bring about a change in the existing laws (Ambedkar, 1987:114).

Reflexion and Action 7.1

Explain Ambedkar's interpretation of the varna theory

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b) Genesis of Caste System in India

Ambedkar studied the definitions of caste proposed by Senart, Nesfield, Risley, and Ketkar closely. According to Senart, "a caste is a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary; equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festival: Bound together by common occupation, which relate more particularly to marriage and food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of a certain penalties and above all by final irrevocable exclusion from the group". Nesfield defines a caste as, "a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community". Ambedkar quotes Risley, according to whom, "a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous Community". Finally, Ambedkar took note of Ketkar's definition of caste. According to Ketkar caste is, "a social group having two characteristics— I) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born. II) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group". Reviewing the aforesaid definitions of castes given by different social scientists, Ambedkar emphasises that most scholars have defined caste as an isolated unit.

Ambedkar analyses only those elements from the definitions of castes which he regards peculiar and of universal occurrence. For Senart, the "idea of pollution" was characteristic of caste. Ambedkar refutes this by arguing

that by no means it is peculiar to caste. It usually originates in priestly ceremonialism and in the general belief in purity. Its connection with caste as an essential element may be ruled out because even without it the caste system operates. He concludes that the idea of pollution is associated with caste only because priesthood and purity are old associates and it is the priestly caste, which enjoys the highest rank in the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar identifies the absence of dining with those outside one's own caste as one of the characteristics in Nesfield's definition of caste. He points out that Nesfield had mistaken the effect for the cause. Absence of inter-dining is effect of the caste system and not its cause. Further, Ketkar defines a caste in its relation to a system of castes. Ketkar identified two characteristics of caste, (a) prohibition of inter-marriage and (b) membership by autogeny. Ambedkar argues that these two aspects are not different because if inter-marriage is prohibited, the result is that membership is limited to those born within the group. After critical evaluation of the various characteristics of caste, Ambedkar infers that prohibition or rather the absence of inter-marriage between people of different castes is the only element that can be considered as the critical element of caste. Among the Hindus, castes are endogamous while gotras within a particular caste are exogamous. In spite of the endogamy of the castes, exogamy at the level of gotra is strictly observed. There are more rigorous penalties for those who break the laws of exogamy than those who break the laws of endogamy. It is understandable that exogamy cannot be prescribed at the level of caste, for then caste, as a definite, identifiable unit would cease to exist.

Ambedkar further says that, preventing marriages out of the group creates a problem from within the group, which is not easy to solve. The problem is that the number of individuals of either sex is more or less evenly distributed in a normal group and they are of similar age. If a group desires to consolidate its identity as a caste then it has to maintain a strict balance in the number of persons belonging to either sex. Maintenance of numbers becomes the primary goal because, if a group wants to preserve the practice of endogamy, it is absolutely necessary to maintain a numerical equality between marriageable individuals of the two sexes within the group. Ambedkar (1978: 10) concludes, "The problem of caste, then, ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes within it." What naturally happens is that there is a 'surplus' of either sex in the society. If a man dies his wife is 'surplus' and if a woman dies her husband is 'surplus'. If the group does not take care of this surplus 'population, it can easily break the law of endogamy. Ambedkar argues that there are two ways in which the problem of 'surplus women' is resolved in society, 'Surplus' women may either be burnt on the funeral pyre of their husbands or strict rules of endogamy may be imposed on them. Since burning of women cannot be encouraged in society, widowhood bringing with it prohibition of re-marriage is imposed on them.

As far as the problem of 'surplus men' is concerned, Ambedkar says that men have dominated the society since centuries and have enjoyed greater prestige than women. The same treatment, therefore, cannot be accorded to them. A widower can remain so for the rest of his life; but given the sexual desire that is natural, he is a threat to the morals of the group particularly if he leads an active social life and not as a recluse. He has to be, therefore, allowed to marry second time with a woman who is not previously married. This is, however, a difficult preposition. If a widower is provided a second woman, then an imbalance in the number women of marriageable age is

created. A 'surplus man' can therefore, be provided wife who has not yet reached marriageable age i.e. a minor girl. Ambedkar identified four means by which numerical disparity between two sexes can be dealt with, burning of widow with her deceased husband; compulsory widowhood; imposition of celibacy on the widower; and wedding of the widower to a girl who has not yet attained marriageable age. In Hindu society, the customs of sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, and marriage of minor girls are practiced. A widower may also observe *sanyasa* (i.e. renounce the world). These practices take care of the maintenance of numerical balance between both the sexes, born out of endogamy.

For Ambedkar, the question of spread and origin of caste are not separated. According to Ambedkar the caste system has either been imposed upon the docile population of India by a lawgiver as a divine dispensation or it has developed according to some law of social growth peculiar to the Indian people. Ambedkar refutes the notion that the law of caste was given by some lawgiver. Manu is considered to be the law- giver of Hindus; but at the outset there is doubt whether he ever existed. Even if he existed, the caste system predates Manu. No doubt Manu upheld it and philosophised about it, but he certainly did not and could not ordain the present order of Hindu society. His work ended with the confiscation of existing caste rules and the preaching of caste *dharma* or duties obligations and conduct associated with each caste. Ambedkar rejects the argument that the Brahmin created the caste. He maintains that it was necessary to dismantle this belief because still there is a strong belief in the minds of orthodox Hindus that the Hindu society was moulded into the framework of the caste system and that it is consciously crafted in the shastras. It may be noted that the teaching and preaching of shastras or the sacred texts is the prerogative of the Brahmins.

Ambedkar agrees with the second argument i.e. of some law of social growth peculiar to Indian people about the spread of caste system. According to western scholars, the bases of origin of various castes in India are occupation, survival of tribal organisations, the rise of new belief system, crossbreeding and migration (Ambedkar, 1978:17). The problem, according to Ambedkar, is that the aforesaid nuclei also exist in other societies and are not peculiar to India. Ambedkar asked, "why they did not 'form' caste in other parts of this planet?" At some stage, the priestly class detached itself from rest of the body of people and emerged as a caste by itself. The other classes that were subject to the law of social division of labour underwent differentiation. Some of these classes got divided into bigger groups and some into smaller ones.

According to Ambedkar, "This sub-division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close them of their accord? I submit that there is a double line of answer: Some closed their door: Others found it closed against them. The one is a psychological interpretation and the other is mechanistic, but they are complementary" (Ambedkar, 1978: 18). Explaining the psychological interpretation of endogamy, Ambedkar opined that endogamy was popular in the Hindu society. Since it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was whole -heartedly imitated by all the non- Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who, in their turn, became endogamous

castes. Ambedkar quotes Gabriel Tarde's law of imitation in this context. According to Tarde, "imitation flows from higher to lower". Secondly, "the intensity of imitation varies inversely in proportion to distance... Distance is understood here in its sociological meaning" (Ambedkar, 1978: 19).

Ambedkar points out that some castes were formed by imitating others because crucial conditions for the formation of castes by imitation existed in the Hindu society. He feels, (i) that the source of imitation must enjoy prestige in the group; and (ii) that there must be "numerous and daily relations" among members of the group. Ambedkar opined that the Brahmin is treated as next to God in Indian society. His prestige is unquestionable and he is the fountainhead of all that is good. He is idolized by scriptures therefore, "Such a creature is worthy of more than mere imitation, but at least of imitation; and if he lives in an endogamous enclosure should not the rest follow his example?" (Ambedkar, 1978:19)

He argues that the imitation of non-Brahmin of those customs which supported the structure of caste in its nascent days until it became embedded in the Hindu mind and persists even today, is testimony to fact that imitation is the cause of formation of caste. The customs of sati, enforced widowhood, and girl marriage are followed in one way or the other by different castes. Ambedkar opines, "Those castes that are nearest to the Brahmin have imitated all the three customs and insist on the strict observance thereof. Those that are less near have imitated enforced widowhood and girl marriage; others, a little further off, have only girl marriage and those furthest of have imitated only the belief in the case principle"(Ambedkar, 1978: 20).

c) Caste and the Division of Labour

Ambedkar says that the caste system assigns tasks to individuals on the basis of the social status of the parents. Looked at it from another point of view, this stratification of occupations that is the result of the caste system is positively pernicious. Industry is never static. It undergoes rapid and abrupt change. With such changes an individual must be free to change his occupation. Without such freedom to adjust to changing circumstances, it would be impossible for a person to earn a livelihood. Now, the caste system does not allow Hindus to adopt occupations that do not belong to them by heredity. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a cause of much of the unemployment in the country. Furthermore, the caste system is based on the dogma of predestination. Considerations of social efficiency would compel us to recognise that the greatest evil in the industrial system is not so much poverty and the suffering that it involves as the fact that so many peoples have callings that hold no appeal to them. Such callings constantly evoke aversion, ill will and the desire to evade. The occupations that are regarded as degraded by the Hindus such as scavenging evoke aversion for those who are engaged in them. Given the fact that people pursuing such occupations out of some compulsion want to give them up, what efficiency can there be in a system under which neither people's hearts nor their minds are in their work?

d) Socialists and the Caste System

Ambedkar further analyses the steps taken by the socialists to annihilate the caste system through economic development and reforms. Ambedkar questions the wisdom of socialists who professed that acquiring economic power is the only motive by which man is actuated and economic power is the only

kind of power that one can exercise effectively over others. He opined that social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power. He suggests that religion, social status, and property are all sources of power and authority that come into play in different situations. Ambedkar feels that without bringing reform in social order one cannot bring about economic change. He also cautioned the socialists that the proletariat or the poor do not constitute a homogeneous category. They are divided not only on the basis of their economic situation but also on the basis of caste and creed. They cannot, therefore, unite against those who exploit them. According to Ambedkar (1978:48), "It seems to me that other things being equal the only thing that will move one man to take such an action is the feeling that other men with whom he is acting are actuated by feeling of equality and fraternity and above all of justice. Men will not join in a revolution for the equalisation of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed. The assurance must be the assurance proceeding from much deeper foundation, namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity". The elimination of caste through economic reform is not tenable hence socialists would have to deal with hierarchy in a caste first before effecting economic change.

e) Annihilation of Caste

Ambedkar explains that caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire that prevents the Hindus from free social interaction. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. If someone wants to break the caste system, he/she has to attack the sacredness and divinity of the caste. Ambedkar believed that the real way to annihilate the caste system is "to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras. How do you expect to succeed, if you allow the Shastras to continue to mould the beliefs and opinions of the people? Not to question the authority of the Shastras, to permit the people to believe in their sanctity and their sanctions and to blame them and to criticize them for their acts as being irrational and inhuman is an incongruous way of carrying on social reform. Reformers working for the removal of untouchability including Mahatma Gandhi, do not seem to realise that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated upon their minds by the Shastras and that people will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the Shastras on which their conduct is founded" (Ambedkar, 1978: 68).

Ambedkar further added that the caste system has two aspects, it divides men into separate communities; and it places the communities in a graded order one above the other as discussed earlier. The higher the grade of a caste, the greater is the number of religious and social rights. Now, this gradation makes it impossible to organise a common front against the caste system. Castes form a graded system of sovereignties, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution happened, some of them would lose more prestige and power than others. It is, therefore, not possible to organise a mobilisation of the Hindus.

Can you appeal to reason and ask the Hindus to discard caste as being contrary to reason? Here, Ambedkar quotes Manu "So far as caste and varna are concerned, not only the Shastras do not permit the Hindu to use his reason in the decision of the question, but they have taken care to see that no occasion is left to examine in a rational way the foundations of his belief

in caste and varna"(Ambedkar, 1978: 72). Ambedkar argues that if one wanted to dismantle the caste system then one would have to implement law(s) to change the caste system. He proposes the following reforms within the he Hindu religion in order to dismantle the caste system. (i) There should be one and only one standard book of Hindu Religion, acceptable to all Hindus and recognised by all Hindus; (ii) it would be appropriate if priesthood among Hindus was abolished, failing which the priesthood should at least cease to be hereditary. Every person who professes to be a Hindu must be eligible for the position of a priest. Law should ensure that no Hindu performs rituals as a priest unless he has passed an examination prescribed by the state and holds a permission from the state to practice; (iii) no ceremony performed by a priest who does not hold the permission would be deemed to be valid in law, and a person who officiates as priest without the permission should be personalised; (iv) a priest should be the servant of the state and should be subject to the disciplinary action by the state in the matter of his morals, beliefs; and (v) the number of priests should be limited by law according to the requirements of the state. These, according to Ambedkar, would provide the basis for the establishment of a new social order based on liberty, equality and fraternity, in short, with democracy.

Having analysed the exploitative nature of Hindu social order born out of varnas, castes and sub-castes, Ambedkar gives his own vision of an ideal social order. He looked forward to a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. Fraternity creates more channels for association and sharing experiences. This helps in establishing an attitude of respect and reverence among the individuals towards fellowmen. For Ambedkar, liberty benefits the people by giving them freedom of choice of occupation. Lastly, it is a fact that all men are not equal in terms of their physical and economic endowment people alike these elements were absent in a caste-ridden society.

7.3   Ram Manohar Lohia on Caste

Ram Manohar Lohia believed that caste system is directly related with the division of labour. According to him caste system will exist in one form or the other wherever there is hereditary production though on a small-scale. Further, he said that whenever there is centralisation of land or when landowning classes hold power, there would be Kshatriya varna. Wherever there is priestly class for the assistance of Kshatriya, there will be Brahmin varna. Wherever there is agriculture, and exchange, there will be Vaishya varna, and wherever the branches of production are developed in special form of branches of artisans, there will exist a Shudra varna.

The development of caste system is related with the development of craft knowledge. Brahman is a varna, but the varna in itself does not connote an occupation. This is also true of the Kshatriya and Vaishya varna. Vaishyas, for example, can be traders, agriculturists and/or pastoralists. They do not follow only one occupation. Reference to Kumhar, Lohar, Sunar, and Chamar is, however, accompanied with connotation of occupation. Hence according to Lohia castes are, in reality, found in the Shudra varna only. With the development of one kind of craft, a group of peoples get associated with it. All the kinds of crafts are collectively put together.

The Jat, Gujar, Ahir are groups, which are treated as jats. We don't come to know about any occupation just by reference to a jati. The trade of milk

is now associated with Ahirs. Traditionally the Ahirs, were not traders of milk. According to Lohia they were a republic society, which settled in India and then merged with the federal system. This merger gave them the identity of a caste. Further, according to him, endogamy is the second characteristic of the caste system. There are number of gotras in a particular caste. Individuals of a given gotra believe that that they have descended from a common ancestor and are of common blood. It is for this reason that people of a gotra do not marry among themselves. They marry outside their gotra but within the caste.

Box 7.1: Caste Restricts Opportunity

"Unlike the Marxist theories which became fashionable in the world in the 50's and 60's, Lohia recognised that caste, more than class, was the huge stumbling block to India's progress. Then as today, caste was politically incorrect to mention in public, but most people practiced it in all aspects of life - birth marriage, association and death. It was Lohia's thesis that India had suffered reverses throughout her history because people viewed themselves as members of a caste rather than citizens of a country. Caste, as Lohia put it, was congealed class. Class was mobile caste. As such, the country was deprived of fresh ideas because of the narrowness and stultification of thought at the top, which was comprised mainly of the upper castes, Brahmin and Baniyas, and tight compartmentalisation even there, the former dominant in the intellectual arena and the latter in the business. A proponent of affirmative action, he compared it to turning the earth to foster a better crop, urging the upper caste as he put it, "to voluntarily serve as the soil for lower castes to flourish and grow", so that the country would profit from a broader spectrum of talent and ideas.In Lohia's words, "Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of the people". [2] In this own party, the Samyukta (united) Socialist Party, Lohia promoted lower caste candidates both by giving electoral tickets and high party positions. Though he talked about caste incessantly, he was not a casteist — his aim was to make sure people voted for the Socialist party candidate, no matter what his or her caste. His point was that in order to make the country strong, everyone needed to have a stake in it. To eliminate caste, his aphoristic prescription was, "Roti and Beti", that is, people would have to break caste barriers to eat together (Roti) and be willing to give their girls in marriage to boys from other castes (Beti)," (cited from Ramakrishnan, 2005: 2-3).

Quoting Marx, Lohia writes that there is division of labour in the society and people get associated with an occupation. Division of labour leads to specialisation in labour. Large number of branches of production also emerges. People, therefore enter in exchange relationship with other societies (Marx, 1867: 353). According to Lohia the important aspect in Marx's writing is that the exchange takes place not only at individual level, but also at the level of family and tribe. Production takes place at the family level too. Marx believed that the exchange does not take place at individual level. From this we should understand that one or two people do not participate in production, trade and exchange. The whole family takes part in these processes.

Lohia believes that the caste system is restricted to the Shudra varna. He said that the leaders of the society always want to preserve the varna system (Sharma, 2000). He argues that the custodians of society are not bothered if the individuals from the lower varna change their occupation and status but if they try to take up the occupation of the higher varna people and aspire to acquire their status then it is dysfunctional for the society and is strongly resisted by the elite groups (Plato quoted in Sharma, 2000).

a) Dysfunction and Annihilation of Caste

Lohia was of the opinion that caste system in India is the largest single cause of the present material and spiritual degeneration of the country. People often equally the prosperity of their own caste with the country's progress. This is detrimental to the nation's progress. Several political parties talk about abolition of the caste system. Lohia pointed out that while women, harijans, shudras, depressed Muslims and Christians, and Adivasis constitute more than 85 per cent of the total population, their representation in the domains of politics, army, trade, and highly paid government jobs is dismal. Caste system can be abolished only when this imbalance is corrected. He strongly felt that the backward castes should get the opportunity to lead. They should get at least 60 per cent of the key posts in public life. This change should be effected through legal protection. Lohia was optimistic about the preferential opportunity extended to the backward classes. He thought this way India would emerge as a powerful nation.

Box 7.2: Preferential Opportunities

"Lohia identified the prevalent caste system to be the main cause of India's degeneration in all respects including economic and spiritual. According to him, the caste system crushes the human spirit and individual freedom of low castes. For this reason, he suggested special opportunity to be provided to the backward classes. He argued that preferential opportunities should be provided to scheduled caste and other backward sections of the society. Lohia pointed out that backward class consists of women, Harijans, Shudras, Adivasis, depressed Muslims,…… High caste, English education and wealth are the main criteria of India's ruling class therefore, Lohia suggested that preference should be given to these backward classes in the matters of land distribution, employment, and educational opportunities" (Nath, 2002: 216).

Lohia also wanted that the backward castes should understand their own shortcomings. He opined that a lower stratum of society instinctively imitates the elite groups. The backward castes should refrain from imitating the vices of the twice-born castes. Those of the low-caste who hold the positions of leadership must get rid of jealousy and should endeavor to acquire a strong character, because jealousy would throw leadership into the hands of people with evil intentions. Another obstacle in the way of progress of the backward castes is the consolidation of power in the hands of few. Hundreds of 'backward castes' that constitute two-thirds of India's population continue to aspire for access to resources. For parliamentary elections, such backward castes should get our attention. Leaders should be created from their ranks, so that their voices and actions may infuse and inspire satisfaction, self-respect and fearlessness among them.

To make a backward caste prosperous in its collectivity, self-respect and fearlessness are important. A political programme to attack the caste system

must be coupled with social activities such as collective feasting. Lohia was convinced that literature, participation dramas, fairs, and games might serve, as media of cultural interaction, exchange, and diffusion. Arguing against the case that by the destruction of capitalist system through class struggle caste will automatically wither away, Lohia, said, "In the first place, in a country cursed with the caste system, it is not possible to end the feudal and capitalist inequalities through class struggle alone. Moreover, why are those, who view class struggle as inevitable for the establishment of a classless society, so much averse towards caste struggle for creation of a casteless society?" One must strive for destroying class and caste through non-violent and peaceful means of propaganda, organisation and struggle.

b) Lohia's End Caste Conference

Lohia organised a conference "End Caste Conference" in Patna, on March 31- April 2, 1961 and passed the following resolution for the annihilation of caste in India:

1) Mixed Dinner: The Conference appealed to the people of India and its units to organise mixed dinner parties everywhere in the country especially in the village.

2) Marriage: The Conference was of the opinion that the caste system can be destroyed only when inter-caste marriages became common. To propagate these ideas discussions, plays and fairs should be organised. The enforcement of inter-caste marriages by government would not suffice. The Conference was clear that here inter-caste marriage would mean the marriage between Dvija and Shudras or Syeds and Julahas, and not between different sub-castes among high-castes.

3) The Conference suggested opined that titles affixed to names should be evolved in such a way that it does not indicate the caste of a person.

4) The Conference also passed a resolution for granting special opportunities to those who have been oppressed for thousands of years so as to bring about a positive change, in the traditional set up in society because the caste system results in erosion of strength and ability of these. Keeping in mind the question of merit the Conference resolved, "Whether able or not, Women, Shudras, Harijans, Backward Castes, Adivasis, and Muslims like weavers will have to be given 60 per cent reservation "(Lohia, 1964: 141).

The Conference agreed that religious, social, and economic programs would have to be carried out along with a political program to eradicate the caste system. Landless lower castes will have to be provided of land for cultivation and housing by way of re-division of land or through land army. Further, "Religion will also have to be cleared of its rubbish about castes" (Lohia, 1964: 141).

Reflection and Action 7.2

Compare Ambedkar's and Lohia's ideas about annihilation of caste.

7.4 Conclusion

As you would have realised, the ideas of Ambedkar and Lohia converge on many counts. Both of them regarded caste as an oppressive, exploitative system which restricts opportunities and create imbalances and inequalities Both of them agreed that caste should be annihilated through they differed

in the basic approach and the means to annihilate it. While Ambedkar talked about one, common book of Hindu religion and abolition of the institution of traditional priesthood, Lohia focused attention on creating situations of common feasting cultural interactions and cultural exchange. It also favoured implementation of preferential polities for the weak and the downtrodden.

7.5 Further Reading

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Census Perspective

Contents

Learning objectives

After going through this unit. you will be able to

- understand the importance of census in constituting caste identity

- explain the articulation of caste in census operations from a sociological perspective

- discuss the view points regarding inclusion of caste as an essential component in the census.

8.1 Introduction

The decennial census is an important source of information for certain aspects of India's society and economy. The census contains information about the number of people, their age, sex, occupation, educational level and the like. While pre-colonial states also conducted censuses, this was usually for the limited purposes of taxation and conscription to the army (see Anderson 1991: 169 for the Malayo-Javanese context; Smith 2000: fn1, on the Ottoman empire).. The enumeration of caste too was not entirely a new practice introduced by the British colonial government : the Manusmriti, Kalhana's Rajatarangini and the Ain-i-Akbari, all have lists of castes. However, the census, as we know it today, in terms of scale, the kind of information collected, and the variety of administrative uses to which it is put, can be traced to the modern bureaucratic state. For the British colonists in particular, the census was seen as an essential tool to understand, and thereby control, the large and diverse Indian population.

Caste and religion were viewed as important sociological categories which would explain a variety of other issues — including what we now clearly recognise as unrelated factors like insanity, intelligence, desire and ability to fight in the army etc. While religion continues to be enumerated in the census, caste (for categories other than scheduled caste and scheduled tribe) has disappeared from it.

Caste was a key census variable from 1871 to 1931. The census of 1931 was the last census to provide tables of the distribution of population on the basis of caste. Although caste returns were collected in 1941 they were not tabulated owing to war time economy measures. In 1951, apart from data on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, limited caste returns were collected from other 'backward castes'. However, the results were not published and were only made available to the First Backward Classes Commission (Roy

Burman 1998; Galanter, 1984: 164)). The constituent legislative assembly framing the Census Act of 1948 decided not to include the component of caste on the grounds that the portrayal of India as a land of many castes, languages and religions had been used by the British colonial authorities to claim that Indians would never be able to unite and govern themselves and therefore needed the British to rule them. However, the government continued to record information on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, in order to monitor the success of various government programs to improve their situation. In the run up to the 2001 census, there was a fresh debate over whether a person's caste should be recorded in the census. One view was that it was necessary to include caste so that the economic and social status of each caste could be measured, while the other view was that it would be difficult to identify castes and such enumeration would unnecessarily enhance 'casteism'. Eventually, it was decided not to include caste in the census.

This unit will deal with the manner in which the census in India has dealt with caste; the effect of caste enumeration in the census on caste identity; the influence of the census on the conceptualisation of caste in sociology; and the debate which arose in the late 1990s over whether caste should be included in the 2001 census.

8.2 Caste in the Census

The term caste is commonly accepted as having originated from the Portuguese term *castas* to describe breeds, species, tribes etc., and refers both to the four classical *varna* categories and to the jatis or the specific local units in which people identified themselves.. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was considerable fluidity both at the level of *jatis* and *varnas*. Economic differentiation, migration and ecological difference all played a role in creating new castes or enabling people to change their caste identities, through fission and fusion of jatis. In the unsettled conditions following the break-up of the Mughal empire, many chiefs of *adivasi* ('Scheduled Tribe') or low caste background became kings in their own areas. They claimed Rajput or Kshatriya (warrior) status and employed Brahman priests to invent suitable genealogies for themselves (Sinha,1962). There was no all-India ranking of castes, and caste ranking changed over time. Dirks(1993), for instance, has argued that the separation of religion and politics and the ritual exaltation of the Brahman over the Kshatriya in south India is a product of the colonial period.

As colonial rule became more entrenched, the colonial administrators needed to know and understand their native populations in order to govern them. In the 19th century, 'race' became a scientific pre-occupation with many studies carried out to classify races. (Of course, contemporary science and genetics has shown us that there is no such thing as biological race). The decennial census, along with the series of Imperial Gazetteers, Ethnographic Surveys, Settlement Records etc. played an important role in promoting certain ideas of caste and race. Caste and religion were seen as key categories with which to explain 'native' behaviour:

> It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the obvious advantage to many branches of the administration in this country of an accurate and well arranged record of the customs and domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes. The entire framework of

native conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. For the purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease, and of almost every form of executive action an ethnographic survey of India, and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants(Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Public), Simla, 25 May 1901).

Thus colonial authorities used caste to explain insanity, the latter "being a disease associated with the socially higher and economically more provident classes" (Census of India, 1921, Vol. I, Part I: 209); to help in the recruitment of 'martial races' to the army; or to determine which groups had a propensity to crime (thus creating the category of 'criminal tribes').

However, recording caste in the census was not an easy task. Successive Census Commissioners described the caste tables as the most troublesome and expensive part of the census, pointing to the vague and contextual nature of responses (Census of India, Risley, 1903:537; Census of India, Yeatts, 1941:20). Yet, upto 1931, it was seen as a necessary part of the demographic record and essential for governance. The consequence was a form of systematisation that slotted people into arbitrary, often untrue to their experience, but separate, mutually exclusive and thereby *enumerable* categories. In 1881, in Madras presidency alone, the inhabitants returned 3208 different castes, which through grouping were reduced to 309 (Report by the Officers appointed to Consider the Suggestions for a General Census in India in 1881, National Archives Library).

Box 8.1: Collection of information for the Census

"In the development of a classification system for castes, there were two interlocked but operationally separable problems: the actual question which an enumerator asked an individual; then how his answer was interpreted by a clerk and eventually by a supervisor of the census of a district or of a larger unit. The actual taking of the census was a two-step affair. Enumerators were appointed by circle supervisors, who were usually government officials. Supervisors were patwaris, zamindars, school teachers or anyone who was literate. They were given a form with columns on which was to be entered information about every member of a house-hold. The information to be collected was name, religion (e.g. Hindu, Muslim), sect, caste, subdivision of caste, sex, age, marital status, language, birthplace, means of subsistence, education, language in which literate and infirmities. There was a one-month period before the actual date of the census in which the enumerator was to fill in the forms, and then on the day of the census he was to check the information with the head of the household.

As an aid to achieving standardisation in the recording of information on caste and subcaste, lists were prepared as early as the 1881 census which gave standard names with variations for the castes. The supervisors were supposed to instruct the enumerators in how to classify responses. The lists of castes were alphabetically arranged giving information giving information on where they were to be found and containing very brief notes" (Cohn, 1987 : 243-44).

The process was described by Risley thus:

> "If the person enumerated gives the name of a well known tribe or caste…all is well. But he may belong to an obscure caste from the other end of India; he may give the name of a sect, of a sub-caste, of an exogamous sept or section….his occupation or the province from which he comes. These various alternatives…undergo a series of transformations at the hands of the more or less illiterate enumerator who writes them down in his own vernacular and the abstractor in the Central Office who transliterates them into English. There begins a laborious and most difficult process of sorting, referencing, cross-referencing and corresponding with local authorities, which ultimately results in the compilation of Table XIII showing the distribution of the inhabitants of India by Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality"(Risley, 1903:537).

Hutton also remarked on the fact that the number of castes enumerated had gone down from 1881 to 1931, and that 'the methods employed must have been arbitrary' but noted the inevitability of the selective system of classification, where individuals were asked not just what their sub-caste was but which of the *listed* sub-castes they fitted into (Home Public F. No. 45/17/30, NAI). As Peter Ratcliffe notes, a pre-coded approach, even with room for 'other-please specify' options, tends to structure responses and introduce distortions (Ratcliffe, 1996:8).

Further, a census systematisation could not allow a person to have two castes or two religions. Even when religious syncretism was recognised, it was dismissed as "the essentially primitive character of the religion of the illiterate and uncultured masses". Where the 1911 census had recognised several sects as Hindu-Muhammadans, in 1921 they were reclassified as either one or the other, except for the Sindh Sanjogis who completely refused and were therefore relegated to 'other' (Census of India, Marten, 1921: 115). At the same time as the census authorities standardised and reduced the number of castes, they also insisted on recording all sorts of sub-castes in an effort to appear fully scientific and to cover the entire social space.

8.3 Census and Identity Politics

Much of the recent social science literature on caste and the Indian census has followed Michel Foucault's theoretical perspective which emphasises the role of 'technologies' of government (i.e. administrative procedures) in creating identities. They argue, therefore, that caste and religion censuses hardened caste and religious identities (Cohn, 1990; Pant, 1987; Appadurai, 1993; Kaviraj, 1992). In his early and influential essay, Cohn noted that by asking questions about religion, language, literacy, caste, occupation etc., the census 'objectified' culture and took it out of context, 'it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves,' and the questions which they asked or the definitions they used were those which the British used to govern them with (Cohn, 1990: 230). Appadurai has gone further in arguing that the "deadly politics of community…would not burn with the intensity we now see, but for contact with the techniques of the modern nation-state, especially those having to do with number " (Appadurai, 1993: 336). Statistics on identities became important as communities demanded guarantees and benefits from the government on the basis of numbers. Representation which means, 'standing on behalf of ' came to be confused with representativeness which means, 'coming from a particular community'

(see Appadurai, 1993: 332; see also Kaviraj, 1992). Thus, for example, the idea came to gain ground that Rajputs should and would vote only for a Rajput candidate, Hindus for a Hindu candidate and so on. This perspective continues to govern the way political parties distribute tickets.

However, not all caste mobilisation can be blamed on the census alone, and the mobilisation around the census was only one of the forms which public activity took. Often, census figures themselves were products of caste mobilisation rather than creating it. For example the number of Maithili speakers varied quite dramatically between 1901, 1951 and 1961, depending on the strength of the Maithili language movement, and the extent to which people identified themselves as Maithili, rather than any changes in population per se (Burghart, 1993: 787). Conlon notes that his attempt to trace changes in educational and occupational status for Chitrapur Saraswats between 1901 and 1931 floundered on the fact that this was a period of a caste unification movement between Chitrapur Saraswats and Gaud Saraswats. Using figures for Gaud Saraswat Brahmans as well created a different problem in that participation in the unification movement had itself been an object of controversy within the caste, and therefore the unified category did not include all Saraswats. (Conlon, 1981: 115-116). In the recent past, Sharad Kulkarni has pointed out that the context of reservations had created problems of reliability in the 1981 census data when several non-tribes with similar sounding names to tribes returned themselves as tribals. This made it difficult to get a true picture of the changing position of certain tribes — levels of population, urbanisation and literacy appeared to have risen, whereas in fact this was due to fraudulent returns (Kulkarni, 1991).

It is not just perceptions about the advantages of being seen to have larger numbers (e.g. the Maithili example) but also individuals' perceptions about the advantages of returning a particular status that influence figures. Although census returns are confidential and cannot be used for any other purpose, the conditions under which census enumeration gets done and the fact that the enumerator is usually a local schoolteacher or someone similar (even if not someone personally known to the respondent) could make it an occasion for negotiating status. This is not obviously an argument against having such figures, but an argument for the need to carefully contextualise quantitative data in a historical, political and cultural framework. While demanding census data to study the changing condition of certain groups, or even to get a one-shot map of groups, one should be careful in assuming the degree to which they will be practically useful, as well as wary of the politics which unthinking use of the data as 'objective' facts implies.

The object of mobilisation changed over time, as the purposes of the census changed. in the service of the state.Wider political events determined both the use to which census data would be put, and public reaction to it. Thus, the comparative numbers of Hindus and Muslims became an issue in the 1931 and 1941 census due to the communal award (in legislatures) and the prospect of partition; the need to disaggregate speakers of different languages in multi-lingual talukas became necessary in the 1951 census as the basis for a linguistic reorganisation of states. Finally, from 1921 onwards, economic issues achieved greater importance. As the nation developed, what mattered as much as the differentiation between castes was comparative statistics between countries, which ranged the population figures of one country against that of another, with its accompanying indices of literacy, occupations, degree of urbanisation, etc. Much depends on how 'the nation'

(or rather dominant groups within the nation), defines itself at any given point of time, and as this changes, so do identities, and indices of progress. There has, for instance, been a struggle to have more gender sensitive indexes in terms of sex ratios, female workforce participation or property rights (see Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1998).

Broadly speaking, there were three avenues in which mobilisation around ascriptive identity in the census expressed itself during the colonial period: petitions to have names of castes changed with a view to achieving a higher social status; complaints about the form of questions, including questioning the need for a caste return itself; and thirdly, complaints about the biases of enumerators. The reactions of the Census Commissioners were generally negative to the latter two forms, while the first was admitted as further evidence of the control that categories like religion and caste had over Indians. We shall go through each of these in turn looking at the manner in which the framing of census questions and tabulations generated political arguments, the form which responses took, and the reactions by census authorities.

A) **Petitions regarding changes in caste names or classification:** This was by far the most common reaction set in motion by census questionnaires, and continues even today at the level of representations to Backward Class Commissions (Dahiwale, 1998; Reddy, 1990: 32). Although castes had been enumerated since 1871, it was really only after Risley's 1901 ranking of castes in order of 'native opinion on social precedence' that these demands became numerous and strident. Risley took this as evidence of the soundness of his own principles: "If the principle on which the classification was based had not appealed to the usages and traditions of the great mass of Hindus, it is inconceivable that so many people should have taken so much trouble and incurred substantial expenditure with the object of securing its application in a particular way." (Risley, 1903: 539). But the problem is that castes soon adapted themselves to the new arena offered by the colonial government for advancement. Since Risley had concluded that absence of widow remarriage and the practice of female infanticide were evidence of high status, many castes claimed to be following these practices in order to raise their status in official circles.

Some of the claims to higher status names rested upon similarities of names, which were supported by affidavits of leading persons on caste customs, as for example the claim of the Khatris that their name was really a corruption of Kshatriya(Home Dept. Census A, June 1901, Pro. No. 12-13, NAI). Several caste petitions, like that of the Vishwabrahmans and Namobrahmas, blamed jealous Brahmins of other sub-castes for keeping them down, and several, like the Lodhi Rajputs and Vishwabrahmans cited earlier colonial ethnographies, like Enthoven's *Tribes and Castes of Bombay* or Tod's *Annals* as proof of their Brahminical or Kshatriya customs(Home-Census Part B, July 1901, pro. 1/2 on Khatris; Home Public, File No. 45/75/30-Public on Namobrahmas; Home Public F. No. 45/52/30 on Lodhi Rajputs; Home Public F. No. 45/58/1930 on Vishwa-Brahmas; Home Public F. No. 45/44/30 on Saini Kshatris, all in NAI).

There were also some petitions which did not directly have to do with status, but merely demanded separate enumeration from a larger group or asked for the merger of several sub-castes into a generic caste name, such as that from the All India Yadav Sabha, resolving that all sections of the

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Yadavs should be recorded as Yadavs. One file lists sixty five such petitions. (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, Part I & II, Complaints or representations from organisations representing different communities about matters of communal interest arising in regard to the Census enumeration, NAI).

At the census level perhaps it involved nothing more serious than a change in name, but more important was the wider processes that it set in motion. Previously dispersed sub-castes or castes 'recognised' themselves by forming caste sabhas. While the demand for increased material benefits in the form of scholarships or recruitment to the army were often an essential part of their demands (see Cohn, 1990: 249), internal social reform, providing scholarships to their own community etc. were also common. A pamphlet "*Nayee: A Brahman*" by Pandit Revati Prasad Sharma, while part of the claims of the Nais' to Brahmin status, calls upon fellow caste men: "Comrades! all the educated members of the community all over India! Let us join and gather ourselves under the flag of the Akhil Bharatiya Nayee-Brahman Mahasabha to consider upon the ways of amelioration of the society, collecting funds, awarding scholarships and imparting education and strength to the community" (Pandit Revati Prasad Sharma, *Nayee: A Brahman*, Nayee Brahman Prakashan Samiti, Benaras, Jan 1931, p. 71 in Home Public F. No. 45/39/31, NAI).

The Census Commissioners' reactions to this outpour of caste petitions were generally one of amused irritation. Usually, commissioners ruled in favour of or against the change even when clearly they had no competency to do so in terms of religious or social knowledge. , At certain times, the reaction was one of indifference. J.H. Hutton, Census Commissioner in 1931, for example, noted on the Namobrahma case that it didn't matter 'in the least' what they were called so long as the community was identifiable from one census to the next (F.No. 45/75/30-Public, NAI).

B) **Complaints about the form of questions or tabulations:** In the 1930s and 1940s, there were two prominent contexts in which complaints about the formats in which respondents were asked to return themselves surfaced. In some way both were connected with growing Hindu communal assertion, even though ostensibly they were about recording castes (see Jones, 1981 for a fuller description of religious identity in the census). At the same time, the answers bring out very clearly a firm commitment to a colonial view of Indian society as irreparably characterised by divisive caste and religious categories.

The first was the petition by various Hindu sabhas as well as the Jat Pat Torak Mandal, an organisation connected to the Arya Samaj in Lahore, asking not to have caste returns in the census (Home Public F. No. 45/46/30; Resolution No. 4, passed at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Bengal Hindu Sabha on 15.9.1930 inHome Public F. No. 45/67/1930; F. No. 45/65/30, all in NAI). The Jat Pat Torak Mandal was a society made up of adult Hindus who pledged to enter into intercaste marriages either themselves or for their children. In their petition to have caste returns in the census waived for those who did not believe in it, they argued that since the caste system was not an essential part of Hinduism, had impeded the progress of the community, and many of the educated sections had been greatly changed by Western education and culture, "there is an overwhelming majority…who have lost faith in the utility of caste." They emphasised that "to record caste against the name of an individual when he does not believe in it would be forcing caste upon him" and further that "the census clerks are not

expected and should not import their personal knowledge into the census operations." (Petition from the Jat Pat Torak Mandal, Lahore, August 18, 1930, Home Public F. No. 45/46/30, NAI). The Hindu Mahasabha did not want a caste census so that they could show that the Hindus were numerous and united in order to counter Muslim demands for representation (see Jones, 1981: 89). The Muslim league was similarly resistant to the idea of recording castes among Muslims. The government made it clear that while it was prepared to allow "conscientious objectors" like the various reform sects to return themselves as having no caste, it objected to orthodox Hindus refusing to answer the question, when socially they followed caste rules.

The fact that a mere 1.8 million out of 238 million Hindus returned 'no-caste' in 1931, i.e. less than one percent was later cited as evidence that Indians were very caste conscious (Home Public F. No. 1/1/39, NAI). While it is true that this is a very small figure, it is equally clear that the majority were not given the choice of returning 'no-caste'. Even had respondents not returned their own caste, the enumerators would have done it for them. In fact, in 1941, the number of people returning no-caste, especially in Bengal, was large enough to prompt the Census Commissioner to note that in time the caste question could be easily set aside in favour of a 'community' question (Census of India 1941, Vol.1, part 1, by M.W.M. Yeatts. Government of India (GOI): GOI Press, Simla).

Another major demand of the Hindu Mahasabha was that adivasis should be returned as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/57/31 on the resolution of a local Hindu sabha in Assam, NAI). During this period the Hindu Sabhas were also active in proselytising among tribals, highlighting the similarities between their religion and that of the Hindus. The demand for adivasis to be termed Hindus became quite strident in Chota Nagpur. Village meetings of 'Sanatani Adivasis' were held from October to December 1940, resolutions were passed and reported in newspapers (*Indian Nation, Amrit Bazaar Patrika, Searchlight*) accusing the Catholic Sabha of asking enumerators (the majority of whom they claimed were Christian) to record tribal names for non-Christian adivasis. Most of those presiding over the meetings or going in deputation to the Census Commissioner, however, appear to be Hindu townspeople who looked down on adivasis. Their views were reflected in the *Amrit Bazaar Patrika* editorial: "By the bye, what is this tribal religion? What are its tenets? Does any such thing really exist in this country?" (Home Public F.No. 45/39/40,NAI).

As against this, the Bihar government also received a large number of petitions from individual adivasis and associations representing them claiming that they had not been given a hearing before the census instructiosn were issued (Home Public F. No. 45/39/40, NAI). On 9 March, 1940 a large meeting of Muslims, attended by various SC and adivasi representatives was held to counter a Hindu meeting on the 6th. There were complaints that Hindu enumerators had circulated Congress and Mahasabha leaflets containing the misinformation that government had ordered that adivasis should be recorded as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI).

Similar problems were seen in terms of how to return Sikhs and Jains, with the Hindu Mahasabha and some Sikh and Jain organisations asking for them to be classified as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/4/31; Home Public F. No. 45/47/30, petition of Udasi Sadhus, NAI) and several complaints by representatives of scheduled caste associations, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists against being recorded as Hindus, and pointing to Hindu Mahasabha pressure

through 'innumerable volunteers, enumerators and supervisors'(Home Public F. No. 3/1/41; Home Public F. No. 45/55/31 on Sikhs protesting against the refusal of enumerators to record them as Sikhs, NAI). Petitions signed by Jain associations all over the country noted that the community was in danger of being assimilated by Hindus owing to their illiteracy, and the fact that they were scattered. "The column is quite necessary to study the problems of the community and also to keep alive the consciousness of its being an independent community." (File No. 45/13/1930 on Jains protesting Hindu Mahasabha, NAI). There could be similar reasons why an oppressed caste which has developed its own counter culture would want to maintain the consciousness of itself as separate (see Omvedt, 1998).

In Punjab, Dalit castes like the Chuhras complained of pressure to be recorded as Sikhs or Hindus by Sikh and Hindu enumerators and demanded that their religion be entered as Adh Dharm. The proposal was initially opposed by Hutton on the grounds that since they owed their disability precisely to the fact that they were Hindus, they should be returned as Hindus, thus revealing a view of caste as intrinsically bound up with purity and pollution rather than economic standing (Home Public 45/56/30, NA). The same concept of caste appears to be operative in the current policy denying reservations to Dalits of other religions, e.g. Dalit Christians.

In short, the census of 1931 and 1941, in the years before partition and independence had been dragged into disputes between communal forces who wanted to expand their own numbers at the expense of others. In the process, the distinct religion and culture of adivasis and other groups like the Jains and Sikhs was under threat.

C) **Complaints against Enumerators:** In the run up to both the 1931 and 1941 census and immediately after, there were several complaints against enumerator bias in inflating the numbers of one or the other community. This was, by far, the largest and potentially most violent issue around which mobilisation took place.

A report in the *Inquilab*, Lahore of 8th March, 1931 stated that many Muslims were left out of the census enumeration and even for those enumerated, returns had been destroyed. In Moga, many Muslim streets were left out, especially surrounding the Jama Masjid, despite the fact that people stayed up till midnight waiting for the enumerator. (Till 1941, the census enumeration took place on a single night, one specially chosen for its full moon and of any major fairs or festivals that might take people out of their homes). Sweepers and Chamars had also been returned as Hindus and Sikhs while those who called themselves Adh Dharmis had been mistreated. A letter from the Hindu Census Committee, Ludhiana protested against the 'irregular' conduct of the census by a census operation overwhelmingly packed with Muslims, which resulted in decreasing the number of Hindus and offered to pay for a fresh census (ibid).

Intelligence Bureau reports for February and March 1941 show increasing agitation over the issue. Apparently, in Bengal at a secret meeting of the Muslim Central Census Board on February 8th, it was decided to hold a Census week for propaganda purposes. In the Punjab, there was a report on the attempt to burn down a gurudwara in a village in Gujranwala, "inspired by revenge on the part of Muslims against the Hindus and Sikhs who accused the Muslim patwari of bias in enumeration." In several parts of Lahore, there

was no enumeration at all. (Extract from the Intelligence Bureau's Daily Summary of Information, February 3, 1941; Report on the situation in Punjab for the first half of March 1941; CIO Lahore's Daily Report, 3 March 1941, all in Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI.) The Muslim League complained that the Hindu Mahasabha had been successful in influencing the census at least to some degree in Bengal, as shown by a statement issued by the All Bengal Hindu Mahasabha Census Board on 5th March 1941 which thanked "the thousands of Enumerators, Supervisors and Voluntary Census Workers who ungrudgingly offered their services and worked hard day and night for the enumeration of the Hindu strength" (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI).

One of the demands made in deputation to the Home Member, Reginald Maxwell, by M.S. Aney and Bhai Parmanand was that Hindu and Muslim enumerators have their work checked by supervisors of the opposite religion (Home Public F. No. 45/39/40, NAI). In Bengal, a public meeting of the Bengal Congress Parliamentary Party resolved that only joint enumerators would inspire confidence in the public, a demand with which the government of Bengal under the Muslim League also concurred (Home Public F. No. 45/40/40, NAI).

The proposal for outside checking and joint enumerators was shot down by Yeatts on both administrative grounds (there were not enough enumerators of both religions, there was no machinery for settling disputes between them etc.) and grounds of principle. (Home Public F. No. 45/40/40, Note by Yeatts on Bengal letter, 21.12.1940). Defending the impartiality of the enumerators and pointing out that the success of the census depended on the respondents, he added "the alternative to distrusting the citizens of Bengal as their government do, is not to make a farce of the whole thing, but to abandon it altogether, to say to the world `Bengal citizens cannot be trusted therefore we are having no census.'" In both 1931 and 1941, without giving in to demands for outside interference in the census, the Census authorities did try to ensure that as far as possible the enumerators were from the same community as the bulk of those they enumerated, while for special cases, e.g. Assam, Bengal and Punjab, independent enumerators and Census Superintendents were preferred. Europeans were inevitably seen as the best choice for the latter.

Language was yet another issue, for example in Ganjam in 1931, where tension over the percentages of Oriya and Telugu speakers was high. There were petitions by different groups asking to be recognised either as Oriyas or Telugus(Home Public F. No. 45/56/31; F. No. 171/31; F. No. 328/31; F. 45/66/31, NAI). One Rao Sahib N. Ramamurthi, President of the Ganjam Defence League pointed out that the 1901 census had yielded an exceptionally high percentage of Oriya speakers, possibly because the enumerators were mostly Oriya and had entered as Oriya speakers all those who answered questions in Oriya, coupled with the fact that school fees for Oriyas were about half what they were for Telugus and others. But here too, a request for inspection of returns by outsiders was refused, while that of appointing a neutral officer acceded to(Home Public F. No. 1/12/31, NAI).

To summarise, the use of cultural classifications by which to measure the population has been subtly dangerous and consequently the census has been a source of intense politicking, often with negative effects. Although only caste has been singled out as having negative consequences for democracy and therefore not counted, as we have seen above, religious returns have

been equally controversial. In the 2001 census, once again there was controversy in Jharkhand, with the RSS demanding that adivasis be counted as Hindus and adivasi leaders asking for their own religion to be recognised (sarna dharm). The 2001 census data on religion, showing high Muslim growth rates compared to Hindu ones, was picked up by the RSS to claim that Muslims were growing at the expense of Hindus. The figures were eventually found to be wrong, not having taken into account the lack of earlier censuses in Jammu and Kashmir and Assam.

Reflection and Action 8.1

Inclusion of caste as a category in the census fostered casteist identity among the people. Discuss

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8.4 The Impact of the Census on a Sociological Understanding of Caste

Historically, anthropology and demography have been closely intertwined. As Cohn noted, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars' and scientists views' on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by the data and conceptions growing out of the census operations." In large part, this was due to the fact that most of the works on the caste system from 1880 to 1950 were written by officials who had at some point been census superintendents, either for India or for a province (Cohn, 1990: 242). The census itself provided an opportunity for state funded research on ethnological data, at a time when there were few opportunities for professional anthropologists (see Padmanabha, 1978 for a list of anthropological studies conducted as part of the census, including monographs on particular castes and tribes, surveys of fairs and festivals, linguistics studies, and socio-economic surveys of vilages and urban areas). Yet, by 1941, the Census Commissioner was advocating the separation of anthropology from the census, to the mutual advantage of both: "there exists a widespread impression that the main object of the Indian census is anthropological....One unfortunate result of this excessive association of the Census with anthropology was to obscure the basic importance of the country-wide determination which so far the census was the only means of securing......It must also have affected adversely the proper consideration and financing of anthropological work in India. Such work should be carried out year in and year out and not forced into the constructed periods of a ten year convulsion" (Census of India, Yeatts, 1941, Vol I, Part I: 2).

One outcome of the census need for identifiable criteria, at both the basic level and larger aggregations was, as Pant puts it, a 'substantialisation of caste': a caste became a unit "made up of a name, a number of members, physical characteristics, cultural practices, territory occupied, in short, by the sum of all the information about a social group that had been collected over a number of surveys, and from a variety of respondents, whose social points of view were not necessarily common" (Pant, 1987: 161). The effect of this on the bulk of studies of caste has been unmistakable, with considerable debate on the origins of the caste system (race, occupation, cultural ecological explanations); the defining characteristics of castes (e.g. endogamy, restrictions on commensality); the effective unit of caste (sub-caste, caste-cluster, varna); the principles underlying caste ranking (purity-pollution, interactional); mobility within and against the caste system (the

concepts of Sanskritisation, dominant caste emulation, Westernisation, affirming Indic values etc.); whether caste is specific to India or whether it is a limited form of stratification; and whether resistance to caste can only take place within its own categories or can take place against the caste system as a whole. In all these, existing castes are taken as given units. What we need instead are studies that examine the way caste as a system (and the composition of individual castes) changes in response to wider political, economic and historical developments.

Reflection and Action 8.2

Is caste a relevant sociological category in the census operations? Discuss

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8.5 The Debate over Inclusion of Caste in the Census

Like all administrative measures, a caste enumeration is seen as having advantages and disadvantages for different groups of people. Opponents of caste enumeration point to the past experience of mobilisation over caste in the census and the current context of caste antagonisms, to argue that a fresh enumeration would lead to fresh mobilisation and a further hardening of caste identities (Srinivas, 1998, Beteille, 1998). Such mobilisation, it is also argued, would spoil the quality of data. Indeed, the data on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes which the census collects is already subject to political interference. Singh (1992: 25) notes that there are about a thousand cases pending in courts filed by communities keen to get SC or ST status to avail of reservations. In other arenas, however, they lay claim to higher ritual status (see also Kulkarni, 1991; Roy Burman, 1998 on fraudulent returns in the context of reservations). Some sociologists have also argued that caste data is particularly difficult to collect given the multiplicity of names and the contextual manner in which terms are used, and that this problem has been exacerbated with all the changes that have taken place due to migration, modern employment practices, inter-caste marriages etc. (A.M. Shah, 1998; G. Shah, 1998). The nation as a whole would thus lose out in terms of cost incurred, the rise in social conflict and the availability of seeming scientific but in fact unreliable data.

Supporters of caste enumeration argue that the refusal to measure caste is a classic case of upper-caste interests masquerading as the national or universal interest. Even in 1948 when a comprehensive caste return were abandoned, there were some dissenting voices. For instance, P. S. Deshmukh argued, "it is too early to expect that people will agree to the abolition of caste. These very people now wish to continue their exploitation in the name of no-caste. Census operations are very important and for all people they serve as an excellent index to ascertain the progress they have made from time to time" (quoted in Maheshwari, 1986: 142).

The major demand for a caste census has come from Backward Classes Commissions, troubled by the lack of data with which to carry out their tasks. Post independence, the term 'Other Backward Classes (OBCs)' has become popular and is taken to refer to those groups which are not scheduled castes or tribes, but which are still seen to suffer from 'social and educational backwardness'. Although the Constitution uses the term 'classes', this has generally been understood to mean certain castes (Galanter 1984: 166). In many ways the dilemma over whether or not to have caste returns in the census is reflected in parallel debates on how to define backwardness - solely in terms of caste or on some economic criteria (see Galanter, 1984: 172 - 177)

For instance, the chairman of the 1st Backward Classes Commission which identified backward classes by caste later rejected its recommendations, arguing that the caste test of backwardness was inimical to the creation of a casteless society, and recommending in its place residential, economic, education and cultural criteria of backwardness (Galanter, 1984: 172).

The Backward Classes Commissions are required to identify lists of backward classes for their states, in order to implement reservation in jobs and educational institutions and welfare schemes (scholarships etc.). In the absence of census data, the Commissions have extrapolated from 1931 census data. Several of them have also conducted their own sample surveys, collected data from educational institutions and government offices, and invited submissions by individuals and groups (see the range of data used by the Third Backward Classes Commission in Karnataka, cited in Sundar 1999: 123, fn 55). While much of this secondary data would continue to be needed, the task would be made much easier with updated census data. Census data, it is argued, would be useful in drawing up fresh lists of OBCs, for admitting new castes into the list and graduating others out. Further, it might enable proportional representation for disadvantaged castes within the reservation quota (discussion quoted in Deshpande and Sundar 1998: 2158). Graduation out of a beneficiary list, however, is politically very difficult and almost no state government has been successful in practice. The losers in this process tend to be the smaller castes without much political clout (see Bayly, 1999: 293).

Supporters of caste enumeration also claim that it would be useful in planning. To target concentrations of backward groups, one would need block level or district level data, since this is the level at which decisions about locating schools or primary health centres is made. However, again there is a doubtful link between the existence of such data and the actual services provided. While there are few studies of how   local governments work, the studies available suggest that the placing of schools is decided by local powerful groups and not need. P. Sainath, for example, has shown how upper castes always make sure the village school is situated in one of their hamlets, since that ensures their control over polling (Sainath, 1998). Similarly, the absence of facilities in tribal areas despite the data on Scheduled Tribes being available suggests that it is not lack of data which must be blamed, but other factors.

On the other hand, caste census data can play a useful role in creating public awareness and opinion about the systematic lack of facilities for certain groups. While one doesn't need to know the caste of a citizen, or the caste layout of a village in order to make sure that everyone is provided with basic services, in a situation where the government has claimed to have made universal provision, this data can be useful. If, despite the presence of primary schools in every village, census data show that certain castes are getting no education, this is cause for concern, and possible mobilisation.

While opponents of caste enumeration emphasise its role in fomenting mobilisation and hardening identities, supporters of caste enumeration portray it as a move to challenge the status quo by highlighting inequality and eventually eliminating caste (see Deshpande, 1998; Vijayanunni, 1999; see also the very similar arguments in the US and UK contexts over counting race and ethnicity in the census, cited in Sundar 1999: 100-102). While opponents of caste enumeration show unease with unmanageable public action, supportes display a rosy and naive view of the government and the use it

makes of data. If census enumeration is to help at all in overturning caste, it will be because of public mobilisation using the data thrown up, and not because of the state. Rather than fearing mobilisation per se, one's concern should be over what forms it takes. The challenge is really to ensure that such data are not manipulated by purely casteist parties or used to ghettoise the polity.

Larger version of the material contained in this unit is presented in the article, 'The Indian Census: Identity and Inequality' by Nandini Sundar, 1999.

Reflection and Action 8.3

Do you think caste should be included in the census? If so, why? If not, why?

8.6 Conclusion

There is no denying that the apparently simple enterprise of counting the characteristics of the Indian population undertaken by the British officials for convenience in administration emerged as a powerful tool in political, cultural and religious battles.. Conducting a census is a political act in which sensitive information that has political repercussions is taken down. The census data have been put to many uses. The data have been used for drawing comparisons between different communities and religious groups. The census data on caste has immense potential to be analysed in order to understandand address socio-economic problems, as well as to create divisiveness between communities. The task before social scientists is to make use of data appropriately.

8.7 Further Reading

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