

## Unit 28

# Theories of Origin of Caste System

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### Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you will be able to

- give a definition of caste
- outline theories of caste as an institution
- describe the caste system over the ages

## 28.1 Introduction

It is perhaps true that the most frequently mentioned peculiarity of the traditional Hindu Society is the institution of caste, or as it more frequently called, the caste system.

The origin of caste is a subject, which has given rise to a great deal of speculation. The Indian caste system which is an age-old institution, even to it, there is no unanimity with regards to its origin. The caste structure is so complex that in spite of large number of researches done by social scientists no valid explanation with regard to its origin could come out.

This unit seeks to have a look at the various theories of origin of caste system; various definitions given by scholars and also the issue that how the caste system has sustained itself through ages; what all forces were responsible for its sustainability.

## 28.2 Definition of Caste

The word is derived from the Latin word 'Custus', which means 'pure'. The Portuguese word 'Casta' which means race, lineage or pure stock. But 'Caste' was not used in its Indian sense till the seventeenth century. The Indian use is the leading one now, and it has influenced all other uses. As the Indian idea of caste was but vaguely understood, this word was loosely applied to the hereditary classes of Europe resembling the caste of India, who keep themselves socially distinct. The Portuguese used this word to denote the Indian institution, as they thought such a system was intended to keep purity of blood.

On one hand the learner is used to describe in the broadest sense the total system of social stratification, peculiar to India, on the other hand, it is used to denote four more or less distinct aspects of this total system. i.e. varna, jati and gotra.

Careless use of the English word 'caste' has been the source of considerable confusion. Manu distinctly says that there are only four varnas, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra & there is no fifth varna, while he admits of over fifty jatis. Varna, according to Manu are four divisions into which the castes are grouped. But later scholars point out that even Manu confuses jati with varna. The confusion is due to the fact that the Brahmin can be called both a varna and jati.

According to Risley, "a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor; human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give opinions as forming a singly homogenous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside that circle, but within the circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous". Ketkar defines a caste as a social group having two characteristics:

- 1) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born.
- 2) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of such groups has a special name by which it is called. Several of such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are but subdivisions of groups still larger which have independent names.

#### Box 28.1: Views on Caste System

Gait says that caste is an endogamous group or a collection of such groups bearing a common name who by reason of traditional occupation and reputed origin, are generally regarded, by those of their countrymen who are competent to give an opinion, as forming a single homogenous community, the constituent parts of which are nearly related to each other than they are to any other section of society.

Béteille has defined caste, 'as a small and named group of persons characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system'.

M. Senart defines caste 'as 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 festivals; bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to 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 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 or drink with any but persons of their own community.'

Majumdar & Madan define caste thus: "If a number of people constitute a group not because of physical togetherness but because they have some common interests and common ways to doing things, as a consequence of which stratification of society into higher and lower group emerges, then there groups may be called as status groups. If a status group is open to entry, that is, if anybody can become its member by fulfilling certain pre-requisite conditions, like obtaining a degree, or paying an admission fee, or earning a particular income, then the status group may be called a class. If the recruitment is not free, that is, if a status group is not open to anybody, but only those are its members who have certain ascribed, attributes, which cannot be acquired by other, then it is called a caste."

Bougle, the French writer, concludes that the caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics:

- 1) separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food);
- 2) division of labour, each group having, is theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only with certain limits;
- 3) and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

This definition indicates the main characteristics of the system.

Like the numerous definitions given by various scholars since decades there are numerous theories of origin of caste system.

### 28.3 Theories of Origin of Caste System

As is evident from the various definitions given above, caste in India is a social institution, deriving sanction from and intimately interwoven with the Hindu religion. Membership of a caste is compulsory and not a matter of choice. A person is born into it.

It is practically impossible for individuals to change their caste. Each caste boasts of a peculiar tradition of culture and tries to preserve it tenaciously. The customs by which it lives are generally different in some respects from those of any other castes and are sometimes in marked contrast to those of any other caste. The caste system provides the individual member of caste with rules which must be observed by him in the matters of food, marriage, divorce, birth, initiation and death.

Caste sanctions and strictures still govern all social, religious and economic activities.

#### Reflection and Action 28.1

What do you think are the most important aspects of caste. Read the entire unit before writing the answer in your notebook.

It is obvious that such a system of social stratification divides the society into thousands of small, hereditary and endogamous groups, each cluster of groups having its own distinctive sets of customs and practices, which together form a hierarchy, each such group of caste is associated with one or more

traditional occupations and is related to the other by means of an elaborate division of labour.

The caste system on which the traditional order of the Hindu society is based is believed to have been of immemorial antiquity. The complex nature of the caste structure is evident from the fact that, even after a century and a half of painstaking and meticulous research in the history and function of the social system, we do not possess any conclusive explanation of the circumstances that might have contributed to the formation and development of this unique system in India. As commented by D.N. Majumdar, there are today as many theories regarding the origin of the caste system as there are writers on the subject.

Census of India done in 1931 made references of the following five theories with regards to the origin of caste. Hence, to simplify our endeavor we too would follow the same reference.

#### a) The Divine Origin:

It may be pointed out that most of the religious authorities, Shashtra's and puranas have advocated the divine origin of the caste system. So, the general feeling among the Hindus is that it has been established by the order of God or at least by his wishes, and so it should be religiously followed. As per the 'Purusha Sukta' in Rig Veda, the people belong to four main castes (varnas) constituting the four body parts of the purush (the creator). The Brahmin was his (purusha's) mouth, the Rajanya (kshatriya) was his arms, the Vaisya was his thigh; and the shudra sprang from his feet.

This view has also been expressed in most of Dharma-Shastras, smritis and Puranas. Manu, whose pronouncement is vided as an authority, also supported this view. He further asserted that different castes arose as a series of crosses first between the four varnas and then between their descendants and also by degradation due to non observance of sacred rites. Besides, the book of Manu also contains reference to caste by the ten primeval rishis i.e. Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Prachetas, Vaisistha, Bhrigu and Narda. In the Mahabharata, divergent views have been expressed. In Shantiparva, Bhrigu has asserted that the world was created by Brahma and later on separated into castes in consequence of work. But in the Mahabharata it is stated that the Lord Krishna created Brahmins from his mouth, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaisyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. In the Bhagwad Gita it is stated that the four fold division of castes was created by god according to appointment of qualities and duties.

#### b) Karma and Transmigration:

Then there is the theory of karma and transmigration of soul which seeks to justify the caste system. The various conditions of men, the highest, the middling, and the lowest are caused by karma. One's status in life is determined by one's action (karma) in past incarnations. Whatever a man enjoys or suffers is a result of his own actions. His bad actions would bear bitter fruit, whether they were done overtly or covertly. In consequence of many sinful acts committed by one's body, voice or mind, that individual in the next birth would become a bird, or a beast, or be born as a low caste person respectively.

Those who perform good karma pass into superior existence, and those who

lead an ideal life obtain nirvana from birth and death. Such being the idea of retribution and justice, not only one is dissuaded from bad life but he is also persuaded into a meritorious life by promise of absolution, of heaven, of expiration of sins of himself and also his ancestors. Thus even the most wretched man with his, most degrading occupation remains satisfied with the belief that the miseries of his present life, are the result of his sins in his previous life, and if he submissively performs his caste duties in this life he will be born in a higher caste in the next life.

#### **Box 28.2: Formation of Castes**

According to the Racial theory propounded by Herbert Risley (1915) in his book 'The People of India' racial differences and endogamous marriages lead to the origin of the caste system. According to him, caste system developed after emigration of IndoAryans from Persia where the society was divided into four classes—priests, warriors, cultivators and artisans and this they maintained even after coming here. They differed from the non-Aryans in culture and racial traits. So in order to maintain their superior status they started practicing hyper gamy and imposed restriction on 'Pratiloma' marriages.

Risley (1915) described six processes by which the castes might have formed. They are enrolment of tribes of aboriginal in the range of Hinduism either under their own tribal designation or under a new caste name, occupation as the chief factor in the evolution of caste, change in original occupation leading to subdivision of the caste which ultimately developed into separate caste, development of new caste due to neglect of established ceremonial practices, tendency of certain groups to preserve by gone traditions more rigidly, and the sectarian type who started life as religious sects.

Kroeber (1930) supports racial factor but he also regards religious, cultural and occupational factors as significant.

Ghurye (1932) has described the caste system as Brahminical system and believes that the conquered non-Aryan race becomes the shudras who were debarred from religious and social activity of the Aryans.

Majumdar (1957) believes that clash of culture and contact of races led to social groupings. He also believes that three superior classes assigned particular occupation for their members and to maintain their superior status, debarred other people from practicing such occupations. This led to hierarchical caste system.

Thus it appears that the racial factor has been accepted by most of the scholars but still it cannot be taken as the only factor in the development of the caste system.

European writers on the subject of caste origins knew about the racial difference between castes, high and low, and consciously and unconsciously linked their findings to race. Weale wrote that the whole history of India, from the earliest times, had been one long story of colour prejudice and that more cruelty had probably been displayed there than in the rest of the world, believed that the Aryans races who were 'white' simply devised the iron system of caste to prevent the under mixing of a dominant race with a 'black' inferior race.

W.J.Thomas finds marked physical contracts in the population, correlated with superior and inferior cultures and this according to him is the basis of caste distinctions.

Dudley Buxton thinks that caste is still of assistance in dividing up the complex races of the Indian peninsula.

Gillin thinks that it is possible that caste in India originated in the racial differentiations between various populations,

MacIver also leans towards the theory of the racial origin of caste structures. He says that caste perhaps arose but of the superimposition of one endogamous community on another, religion and pride of race which such a superimposition must have engendered.

The colour questions in the formation of caste has also been considered. The colour question at the root of the varna system is apparent from the word verna, which means colour.

The class, which retained utmost purity of colour by avoiding intermixture normally, gained precedence in the social scale. The status also depends upon the extent of isolation maintained by the social groups. The Brahmins were white, the Kshatriyas red; the Vaisyas were yellowish and the Shudras were black as described in the Mahabhart. The three higher varnas have tried to maintain their claims to superior status by keeping to themselves the important professions.

Karve, however does not accept the view that the original meaning of varna was 'colour'. She argues that in the early scanned literature and in grammatical works varna meant 'class'. Karve continues that 'at a later time the word varne to mean 'colour' and the fourfold division of the ancients was then taken to be based on physical feature, namely colour.'

The social factor in the formation of the caste structure, in a sense, admitted by most of the scholars and yet the development of the caste system cannot be explained wholly on the basis of race.

### c) Occupational Theory:

Occupational theory propounded by Nesfield (1885) advocates occupation as the lone factor for the development of this system. According to him, before this system priesthood was not the exclusive monopoly of Brahmins. But later on when hymns and rituals became more complex, a section of people got themselves specialized and became the Brahmins. Due to importance of sacrifices such people came to be more respected. Later they made this occupation hereditary. After this other sections of people also organised themselves for securing privileges. They did this in self-defense and also in imitation of group of people whom they held in high esteem.

#### **Box 28.3: Ranking and Caste**

Different occupations grouped together men from different tribes into castes, which then borrowed the principles of endogamy and prohibition of commensality from the customs of the old tribes and thereby solidified themselves into isolated units. The ranking of any caste as high or low depended upon whether the industry represented by the caste belonged to an advanced or backward stage of culture and thus the natural history of

human industries afforded the chief clue to the gradation as well as the formation of the Indian castes. Thus the castes following the most primitive occupations like hunting, fishing, basket making etc were regarded as the lowest, the metal workers, agriculturalists and readers were higher in rank, while the highest caste was of those who were priests and teachers.

Slater in his book, 'Dravidian Elements in Indian Culture' emphasises the fact that caste is actually stronger in southern than in northern India and suggests that caste arose in India before the Aryan invasion as a result of occupations becoming hereditary and marriages being arranged by parents within the society of the common craft because sexual maturity developed early and trade secrets were thus preserved. As a result of magic and religious ceremonies also, exclusive occupational groups were built up, marriage outside which became prejudicial and contrary to practice. The Aryan invasion had the effect of strengthening a tendency to associate difference of colour and of strengthening also a tendency for castes to be placed in a scale of social precedence. He also maintains the existence in the pre-Aryan society of Indian of an order of priest magicians.

Denzil Ibbetson explains caste as arising from a combination of tribal origins, functional guilds and a 'levitical religion' and lays great stress on the tribe the turning point in the career of a tribe comes when it abandons its wild and romantic life and adopts a particular occupation as its principal method of economic subsistence. This is the guild stage in caste history, and is common at some period or other of economic progress to all peoples in the world. The formation of guilds of occupational groups naturally led to recognition of skills and importance of the various guilds. In medieval times, the guilds vied with one another for predominance in accordance with their economic status exercising various degrees of pressure on the social life of the country. The exaltation of the priestly guild was soon followed by the priests insisting on the hereditary nature of their occupational status, and this led to the formation of endogamous units, as more and more of the guilds wanted to conserve the social status and privileges they enjoyed and to secure these permanently for the members of the guild. Later various other guilds followed suit and a hierarchical organisation established itself.

Chappel and Coon trace the origin of castes to the absorption of aboriginal types, and they also explain the formation of new castes with reference to the emergence of new occupations.

#### d) Tribes and Religious Theory:

From very early times, there has been a gradual and silent change from tribes to caste. This change has taken place in a number of ways, and it is believed that most of the lower or exterior castes of today were formerly tribes.

Risley has mentioned four processes by which the transformation of tribes into castes is effected. The processes are:

- 1) The leading men of an aboriginal tribe, having somehow got on in the world became independent landed proprietors, managed to enroll themselves in one of the more distinguished castes.
- 2) A number of aborigines embrace the tenets of Hindu religious sect and becoming Vaishnavas and giving up their tribal name.
- 3) A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section of tribe enrolling themselves in

the ranks of Hinduism, under the style of a new caste which, though claiming an origin of remote antiquity is really distinguishable by its name from any of the standard and recognised.

- 4) A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section thereof, become gradually converted to Hinduism without abandoning their tribal designation. Risley mentions the case of the Bhumij of Western Bengal, a pure Dravidian race, who lost their original language and now speak only Bengali. They worship Hindu gods in addition to their own (the tendency being to relegate the tribal gods to the women), and the more advanced among them employ Brahmins as family priests. They still retain a set of floristic exogamous subdivision closely resembling those of the Mundas and the Santhals, but they are beginning to forget the totems and the names themselves will probably soon be abandoned in favour of aristocratic designations. The tribe will then have become a caste and will go on giving up its customs that are likely to betray its true descent.

To these four process, Majumdar has added a fifth in which an individual member of an aboriginal or semi-aboriginal tribe adopts the surname and gotra of a particular caste, manages to enroll himself as a member of that particular caste and gradually intermarries with the members of that caste. His wealth and influence attract members of the caste he aspires to belong and thus in the long run he may establish himself as a permanent member of that caste. Cultural contact with Hindu castes leads to the adoption by the tribes of Hindu beliefs, rituals, customs and to participation in Hindu festivals and attendance at Hindu temple.

The process of gradual evolution from the aborigines to a higher class Hindu is a main feature of social evolution in India which government offices have noticed and commented upon it.

Bhuiyas present an excellent example of how from the aboriginal state, caste or group differences and distinctions arose gradually as men disclaimed earlier association and claimed new importance to themselves both divine and social. Similarly, there is a great parallel between the Munda social organisation and the Hindu organisation of 'gotra' and 'varna'. The Mundas are now found in certain parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, where they are known under three different names, the Mundas, Santhals and Hos.

The Santhals are divided into 12 main septs of which the trace of one sept only could not found. Most probably the lost sept has become completely brahminised or Kshatriyaised and their descendents are not likely to give out their secrets.

#### e) Family and Marriage:

This explanation given by Senart (1930) holds that the principle of exogamy is the main basis of Indian caste system. In his opinion caste is the normal development of ancient Aryan institution which assumed a peculiar form because of peculiar conditions in India like prohibition of marriage within one's gotra, pollution by touch with lower classes, prohibition of inter-caste dining etc. He has presumed beginning of caste system in the form of varna division to the Indo Iranian period because of four-fold division of society in the Rig Vedic India.



Risley mentions that the invading Aryans displayed a marked antipathy to marriage with persons of alien black race and devised an elaborate system of taboo for the prevention of such union. But intermarriage could not altogether be prevented.

## 28.4 Caste System Through Ages

Rig Vedic society was basically tribal in character. According to Keith, the Vedic Indians were primarily pastoral, and this holds good for the Aryans known from the early parts of the Rig Veda. The Aryans encountered the urban population of Harappa society and ultimately conquered them in war. Social adjustment between the Aryans and survivors of Harappa society and other people naturally led to the rehabilitation of some of the surviving priests and chiefs into corresponding positions, possibly of inferior nature in the new Aryan society. Early literature throws hardly any light on the process of assimilation between the Aryan commoners and those of the survivors of earlier societies. It is likely that most of them were reduced to what came to be known as the fourth varna in the Aryan society. In essence, the Rig Vedic Aryan society and perhaps the society described in the Atharva Veda, was characterised by the absence of sharp class diversions among its members, a feature, which is usually found in early societies. The Shudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of the Atharva Veda.

The Aryans, white skinned, good featured, making sacrifices and worshipping gods like Agni, Indra, Varun etc were distinguishable ethnically and culturally from the Dasyus, who were black skinned (*krishanthvach*), flat nosed (*anas*), of unintelligible speech (*mridhravach*), not sacrificing (*ayajnan*), worshipping no god (*adevayu*) and following strange customs (*anyavrata*).

### Reflection and Action 28.2

Provide an outline of the various theories of caste. Which one do you favour? Write your answer in your notebook.

Gradually the Daynrs, instead of being exterminated were taken as slaves. 'Das' became in the later literature synonymous with slave and the people were employed in menial jobs. It is most likely that Dasyus (slaves) and Shudras were originally the names of prominent tribes conquered and reduced to slavery by the Aryans. By the time the Purusha Sukta was composed the Dasa slaves of the Aryan conquerors had begun to be called Shudras. The idea of ceremonial impurity of the Shudras involving prohibition of physical and visual contact with him appeared towards the clos of the Vedic period (1000-600 B.C.) The first notice of such a marked degradation is found in the Satapatha Brahamana.

Around the 600 B.C.—300 B.C., the difference between the Vaisayas and Shudras was getting narrower day by day. The occupation of the two castes were practically interchangeable. The Vedic society now advanced from tribalism to feudalions. The proud higher castes — Brahmin and Kshatriya began to adopt a more exclusive policy towards them. The social position of Shudra underwent a change for the worse. Shudra ceased to have any place in the work of administration. The lawgivers emphasised the old fiction that the Shudra was born from the feet of the God and thus imposed on him numerous social disabilities in matters of company, food, marriage and education. The idea that food touched by the Shudra is denied and cannot be taken by a Brahmin is first expressed in the Dharmasutras (500B.C.-300

B.C.). Shudra could not take part in Vedic sacrifices and sacraments. He came to be excluded from the Vedic sacrifices to such an extent that in the performance of certain rites, even his presence and sight were avoided.

It has been said that the origin of untouchability may be traced back of pollution. Untouchability may be traced back to pollution. Untouchability has its origin in both hygiene and religion. Finally the idea of untouchability has been traced to the theoretical impurity of certain occupations.

Sharma thinks that one of the reasons for the origin of untouchability was the cultural lag of the aboriginal tribes, who were manly hunters and galherens, in contrast to the members of the Brahminical society, who possessed the knowledge of metals and agriculture and were developing urban life. Gradually, Brahmins and Kshatriyas withdrew more and more from the work of primary production and tended to be hereditary in their positions and functions. The Nishadas, Chandalas and Paulkasas, the earliest mention of them is found in Yajurved. Out of there chandalas and Nishadas were considered as untouchables in later Vedic Society. In Dharamsutras and Pali texts Chandalas are clearly depicted as untouchables and the Vedic texts kept the fifth caste altogether out from the four-fold division of society. During this time the Varna divided Brahminical society was undermined by the activities of heretical sects and the inclusion of foreign elements such as the Bactrian Greeks, Sakas, Pathans and Kusanas. Manu desperately tries to preserve Brahminical society, not only by ordaining rigorous measures against the Shudras, but also by inventing suitable geneologies for the incorporation of foreign elements into varna society. In order to assimilate numerous aboriginal tribes and foreign elements Manu made a far greater use of the fiction of Varnasamkara (intermixture of varnas) than was done by his predecessors. In the majority instances the mixed castes were lumped with the Shudra in respect of their hereditary duties gives a list of Jatis, many of whom have changed in name and some of them have ceased to exist. He distinguishes the following categories:

- a) four original varnas
- b) castes, which were supposed to be produced by mixtures with pure and mined castes
- c) castes which have lost their status on account of neglect of sacred rites
- d) castes due to the exclusion of persons from the community
- e) slaves and their descendants
- f) people excluded from the community of four Varnas an well as their descendants

Manu mentions the old mixed castes, who are said to have originated from the intermixture of the varnas and ascribes a similar origin to a long list of mixed castes resolve themselves into three types:

- a) castes produced from different pure castes;
- b) those produced by the mixture of pure castes an one side and mixed on the other;
- c) and those produced from parents of mixed origin on both sides.

Manu also advocated that higher castes should avoid all contact with the Chandalas and Svapakas. Chandalas and Svapakas should live outside the villages, their sole property consisted of dogs and donkeys; food vessels used by

them would be discarded forever. Manu goes further that if a Brahmin had contact with a Chandala or Antya, he would fall from his Brahminhood.

The advent of foreign people served to loosen the shackles of the varna system. The law books of the Gupta period retain the distinction between the Shudras and untouchables. During this period there seems to have been not only an increase in the number of untouchables but also some intensification in the practice of untouchability. Fahien (AD 399-414) informs that, when the Chandalas enter the gate of a city or a market place, they strike a piece of wood to give prior notice of their arrival so that men may know and avoid them.

After the death of Harsha (AD 647), Sind came under the occupation of the Arab in A.D. 712 and since then Muslims continued to come to India as travelers, traders and mercenaries. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Muslim invasion with cold-blooded murders, forcible conversion, looting and devastation of the countryside, breaking up of Hindu idols and desecration of Hindu temples began in India on a large scale and the Indians experienced perpetual insecurity. For fear of their culture being submerged under the impact of new forces, the Hindus framed rigid rules against inter-marriage and inter-dining. The principle of hereditary came into prominence by 1000 A.D. Pratiloma and anuloma marriages were discouraged. The position of Shudras improved. There was improvement in their economic condition but intellectually they remained rather backward, because higher education was largely restricted to the elite— the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas.

With continuous Muslim invasions, there was considerable effect on the Hindu social system. In 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was further hardening of the caste system by early marriage to prevent religious conversions. The Portuguese occupation of some part of India in early 16<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to fresh conversions of Hindus into Roman Catholics. In medieval India, with resurgence of Hinduism by Sankracharya (788-820 A.D.) the Muslim and Christian convert freely got reconverted into Hinduism. Further Vaisnavaites and Saivaites devotees a during this critical period, held the torch of Hinduism. Various Bhakti movements by Acharya Ramanuj, Madhavacharya, Vallavacharya, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Tulsi Das and Many other did help check Islamisation of India. Many converts came back to Hindu fold.

By the time British consolidated their position in India, the Hindu social system had accumulated many undesirable features. The various policies of the British rulers were geared mainly for the maintenance of law and order, for the collection of taxes, and for keeping an unrestricted market for British goods. Their centralised administration completely disrupted the old economy of the country. The old village economy which, for long, remained unaffected by the political conflicts and which had given so much strength to the caste system, became disrupted under British rule. The land policy created a new class of landlords and above million in to the ranks of tenants and agriculture labourers.

The caste divided Hindu society which ensured employment and protection to its various caste groups, could not effectively challenge the British policy. For the first time caste system faced a serious challenge from its foreign rules.

Western education and social reforms, brought abolition of untouchability. These movements had an aim of cleansing the Hindu social order of some of its undesirable features, narrowing down the caste distinctions, changing the attitude of high caste people towards the untouchables. Growth and town, establishment of industries in urban areas, introduction of railways, led to relaxation of caste prejudice new economic activities taken by the state gave birth to numerous non caste occupation. A process was set into motion, which began to attack the importance of caste as ritual cum-occupational division of society. The establishment of civil and criminal courts robbed the caste system and the caste panchayats of authority they once had even the members of particular castes.

But the same time the British policy was not for fostering unity and cohesion of the various section of people of India. Its policy was directed towards dividing and sub-dividing. People at whatever level possible be it religion, region, language or caste. Introduction of separate electorates or special recognition accorded to non-Brahmins castes in the south not only contributed to the disruption of whatever solidarity India once possessed and fostered jealousy between provinces, creeds, also hardened the caste distinctions.

Thus we see that the process of continuous adjustment and wider integration was always at work. It is clear from the above discussion that caste system becomes more and which rigid over centuries. The forces which led to origin of caste are also the forces, which led to sustainability of the caste system as such.

## 28.5 Caste: Not an Isolated Phenomenon

Social institutions that resemble caste in one respect or the other are not difficult to find elsewhere. The caste system has survived in a perfect form in India than elsewhere, but Hocart shows that the Indian caste system is not an isolated phenomenon as it is thought to be.

Comparable forms, still exist in Polynesia and Melanesia and that clear traces of them can be seen in ancient Greece, Rome and Modern Egypt.

Hutton finds analogous institutions, which resemble caste in one or other of its aspects in various parts of the world like Ceylon, Fiji, Egypt, Somali, Rnada and Urundi in modern Africa and Burma.

Ghurye traces elements of caste outside India like Egypt, Western Asia, China, Japan, America, Rome and Tribal Europe.

In ancient Persia there were the Atharvas (priests) Aathaesthas (warriors) Vastriya fshuyants (cultivators) and Huitis (patricians). The only important difference lay with regard to fourth class, which was the artisans class in Persia, and the servile or Shudra class in India.

In Western Roman Empire, there were occupational hereditary groups as created by the theodisian code. Such groups would have been created only if there were elements of social segregation in the society.

In Sweden, in the 17th century, marriages outside the class were punished. According to the German law the marriage of a man belonging to the high mobility with a woman is not entitled to the rank of her husband nor is the

full right of inheritance possessed by her and her children. The upper caste Muslims namely the Sheikhs, Saiyads, and the Pathans are intensely cautious of their lineage and avoid weaving marital relations with the low caste muslims like Ansaris and Julahas.

## 28.6 Conclusion

We have come to realise that the major theory of the origin of caste is rooted in the hindu myths and legends. The religious texts accord divine origin to the caste system in India. Interestingly, it is believed that birth in a high caste is, in fact, a reward of good deeds performed in the previous birth. Most people belonging to upper castes seek to arrange marriages within their own caste so as to maintain their superiority.

## 28.7 Further Reading

Srinivas M.N. 1962 *Caste in Modern India and other Essays*, London, Asia Publishing House

Lerner, Daniel 1958, *The Passing Away of Traditional Society*. Free Press of Glencoe