Unit 6
View from the Field

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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

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Rudolph, I, L.& Rudolph, Susanne, Hoeber., 1987, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India.* Orient Longman