CASTE SYSTEM

Introduction

The social structure of Indian society is characterized by a unique social institution called caste. The Indian caste system is a system of social stratification and social restriction in India in which communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called Jātis. The Jātis were hypothetically and formally grouped by the Brahminical texts under the four well known categories: Brahmins, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas, and Sudras. Certain people like foreigners, nomads, forest tribes and the chandalas were excluded altogether and treated as untouchables. The caste system which emerged out of the Varna system as a form of social stratification is peculiar to India and is an inseparable aspect of the Indian society. There is no comparable institution elsewhere in the world for the caste system. Although evidences of caste are to be found in many parts of the world, the most perfect instance is that which exists in India. Attempts are being made to understand the system in its entirety both by the Indian and Western scholars; hence caste system offers interesting issues for debates and discussions.

The meaning of caste

The word "caste" derived from the Latin word castus which means pure was loosely used by the Portuguese to denote the Indian social classification as they thought that the system was intended to preserve purity of blood. This term was first applied to the Indian caste system by Garcia de Orta in 1563. The Sanskrit word for caste is varna which means colour. The system is such a peculiar and complex one that no satisfactory definition is possible, hence we find no unanimity among the scholars on the subject. However, some definitions are quoted below for the benefit of the students.

i. Andre Beteille- "Caste may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized 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".

ii. MacIver- "When status is wholly predetermined, so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then class takes the extreme form of caste".

iii. H. Cooley- "When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary, we may call it a caste".

iv. E. A. Gait- "caste is an endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common name, having the same traditional occupation claiming descent from the same source, and, commonly regarded as forming a single homogeneous community".

v. S. V. Ketkar- "A caste is a group having two characteristics- a. Membership is confined to those who are born of members and include all persons so born, b. The membership is forbidden by an inexorable social law to men outside the group".

vi. A. Green- "Caste is a system of stratification in which mobility up and down the status ladder, at least ideally may not occur".

**Characteristics of caste system**

Segmental division of society: The caste system gives to the Hindu society a segmentary character. The society is divided into various castes, the membership of which is determined by the consideration of birth. The status of a person does not depend on his wealth but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he is born. The caste status is rigidly maintained throughout life and nobody can escape from his caste identity, irrespective of his potentialities or capabilities.

i. Hierarchy: The caste system is hierarchical with a definite scheme of precedence. The whole society is divided into distinct classes with a concept of high and low. Thus Brahmans in India stand at the apex of the social ladder while the Sudras occupied the lowest rank with manifold
ii. Restrictions on food habits: Taboos are observed by the higher castes with regard to cooking, vessels, food and commensality. They abstain from food cooked by a member of a lower caste and also food cooked and served in vessels which are considered impure. The Brahmans do not accept food or water from any other castes or sub-castes or interdine with them during ceremonies and abstain from any kind of drinks and remain teetotallers.

iii. Occupational restrictions: Traditionally, specific occupations are assigned to each of the four castes. Members of any caste are not allowed to take to any occupation which are degrading or impure.

iv. Religious disabilities: There are many rituals which the lower castes are not allowed to perform. They are also not allowed to study the sacred literature and are not given prasadan (consecrated food) until and unless the high caste members receive it.

v. Endogamy: A caste is an endogamous unit in that members of a caste must marry only persons belonging to their caste in order to maintain the purity and identity of the caste. The rule of endogamy is observed not only at the caste level but also at the sub-caste and sub-sub-caste level.

vi. Maintenance of social distance, untouchability and settlement pattern: A social distance is maintained because of the fear among the higher castes of pollution which results from proximity to or contact with the lower castes. The untouchables are not allowed to use public roads or public wells, to enter Hindu temples or to attend public school. Generally, the impure castes are made to live in the outskirts of the city.

vii. Concept of purity: The concept of purity is closely linked to caste and is inherently obvious in the caste system. Opposite to the concept of purity is the concept of pollution. Caste groups in the topmost rungs of the caste hierarchy are ‘pure’ while those at the bottom rungs are ‘impure’.
Origin of caste system

There is no universally accepted theory about the origin of the Indian caste system. However, some theories attempting to explain the origin of the caste system are:

i. Racial Theory: This theory propounds that the caste system is based on the original diversity of races. This theory has been propounded by Herbert Risley, G.S. Ghurye and D.N. Majumdar.

Risley feels that the Aryan element in the Indian population is conspicuously responsible for the development of the caste system. The Aryans who migrated to India already had a caste-like structure corresponding to the four major castes in India. As the Aryans came to India as invaders, they could not bring their women with them and therefore married women from indigenous Indian society. But, at the same time, they did not give their daughters in marriage to non-Aryans. Thus, hypergamy and hypogamy practised by the Aryan invaders who developed a social structure modelled on their native country gave rise to the caste system in India.

Ghurye based his arguments on the Brahmanical system which, he feels, developed in the Gangetic plains. He states that the Aryans who invaded India subdued the non-Aryans and considered them as Sudras.

Majumdar is of the opinion that the Indo-Aryans used for certain groups and orders of people the favourite word varna meaning colour in order to maintain their separate existence.

ii. Political Theory: According to this theory, caste system is a device invented by the Brahmans to place themselves in the highest rung of social hierarchy. Ghurye states "Caste is a Brahmanic child of Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and thence transferred to other parts of India". In the Brahman period, the position of the Brahmans increased manifold. The three lower castes are ordered to live according to the teaching of the
Brahmans who declare their duties and even the king is exhorted to regulate his conduct accordingly. The pre-eminence of the Brahman secured him many social privileges sanctioned by the law-givers.

iii. Occupational or Functional Theory: According to this theory, the origin of caste system can be found in the nature and quality of social work performed by the various groups of people. In other words, occupational specialization or economic functions of different groups have created the caste system. The superiority or inferiority of the occupations is represented in the hierarchy of castes.

iv. Guild Theory: According to Denzil Ibbetson, castes are a modified form of guilds. In his opinion, caste system is the product of interaction of three forces: i. Tribes ii. Guilds and iii. Religion. The tribes adopted certain fixed professions and assumed the form of guilds. In ancient India, priests had greater prestige. They were a hereditary and endogamous group. The other guilds also adopted the same practices and in due course became castes.

v. Religious Theory: Hocart and Senart are the two main advocates of the religious theory. According to Hocart, social stratification originated on account of religious principles and customs. In ancient India, religion had a prominent place. The king was considered to be the image of God. The priest kings accorded different positions to different functional groups. Senart has tried to explain the origin of caste system on the basis of prohibitions regarding sacramental food. He holds that on account of different family duties there grew up certain prohibitions regarding sacramental food. The followers of one particular deity considered themselves the descendants of the same ancestor and offered a particular kind of food as offering to their deity. Those who believed in the same deity considered themselves as different from those who believed in some other deity. Each group worshipping a particular deity gradually assumed caste status.
vi. Evolutionary Theory: According to this theory, the caste system did not originate all of a sudden or at a particular point of time. It is the result of a long process of social evolution in which a number of factors played their part in the development of the present caste system.

vii. Mana Theory: J.H. Hutton feels that occupational classes existed even before the Aryan invasion. Further, the indigenous tribal people had belief in *mana* or the impersonal force in an object, contact with which could emanate power. This belief in *mana*, says Hutton, could have been the forerunner for the purity and pollution concept. The caste system originated by the combination of the pre-Aryan social divisions and the tribal attitude towards the force of *mana*.

**Merits of caste system**

i. Unity in diversity: The Indian caste system has preserved unity in diversity. It has achieved a graded racial and cultural harmony in India.

ii. Co-operation: The caste system has fostered the spirit of co-operation and fellow-feeling among members of the same caste. By helping the poor and needy, it has avoided the necessity of the state supporting the poor.

iii. Economic security: By guaranteeing different types and fixed types of occupations for every man and social group, the caste system has given economic security and psychological security.

iv. Defines economic pursuits: By defining occupations and distributing economic pursuits between different groups, the caste system has ensured for the provision of all functions necessary for life from the social, economic, political, religious and other points of view.

v. Racial and ethnic purity: Through the enforcement of endogamy, the caste system has contributed to the preservation of racial and ethnic purity. It has also fostered the habits of cleanliness by
insisting on ritual purity.

vi. Cultural diffusion: The caste system has helped in cultural diffusion by which the customs, beliefs, skills, behaviour and trade are passed on from one generation to another and further, from the upper castes to the lower castes who have also gradually adopted some ritually clean and hygienic practices as well.

vii. Integration of the country: Because of the caste system, class consciousness develops without breeding class struggle. It has created an efficient organisation of Hindu society without giving any chance to class frictions and factions.

Demerits of caste system

i. Mobility of labour: By restricting change of occupation, it denies mobility of labour and consequently leads to stagnation. The higher castes cannot follow a low occupation which may be lucrative, and the lower castes cannot follow a higher and decent occupation.

ii. Wrong occupation: An individual may not be skilled or interested in his caste trade but may be talented and capable of some other pursuit which by caste conventions may be prohibited. It thus leads to frustration and acts as a barrier to optimum productivity.

iii. Obstacle to national unity: Discontentment felt by the lower caste groups at the behaviour meted out to them in society is an obstacle to national unity as it prevents the development of national consciousness.

iv. Undemocratic: The caste system denies equal rights to all irrespective of their caste, creed or colour. Deprivation of opportunities for mental and physical development of the lower caste individuals erects social barriers.

v. Untouchability: The worst consequence of the caste system is the plight of the `untouchables' who are shunned, despised and prevented from social intercourse with higher caste groups.

vi. Promotes casteism: The members belonging to a caste carry caste
feelings and manifest blind and over-riding loyalty to their caste. This makes them ignore the healthy social standards of justice, fairplay, equity and brotherhood. Under the influence of casteism, members of one caste do not hesitate in harming the interests of members of other castes. Casteism, therefore, spells autocracy instead of a system based on fraternity.

Changes in the Caste System

The caste system has undergone many changes due to modern education, industrialization, means of communication, new legal machinery provided by the British government for punishing all castes in the same way for similar offences, legalizing inter-caste marriages, political awakening, independence of India, abolition of untouchability, democratic form of government, movements of social emancipation, constitutional guarantees provided for the welfare of the backward castes and ex-untouchable castes. During the initial days of British East India Company's rules, caste privileges and customs were encouraged. However, the British law courts disagreed with the discrimination against the lower castes. During the British Raj, many Hindu reform movements such as Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj renounced caste-based discrimination and preached a casteless society. The restrictions on occupations have been relaxed and occupational mobility has become very common. The inclusion of so-called untouchables into the mainstream was argued for by many social reformers. Mahatma Gandhi called them "Harijans" (people of God). However, the term Dalit ("downtrodden") is used now as the term Harijan is largely felt patronising. Gandhi's contribution toward the emancipation of the untouchables is considered controversial. This is usually highlighted by the commentary of his contemporary Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable himself, who frequently saw his activities as detrimental to the cause of upliftment of his people.

Conclusion

Though changes are taking place in the caste system, it still plays an
important role in shaping the Indian societal structure. The system underwent fast changes due to industrialization, urbanization, modernization, education, secularization etc., yet it could neither be weakened nor destroyed and caste practices are still found to be very rigid in the rural areas. Various social reformers have made attempts to stop discrimination based on caste and because of their movements against this discrimination, there has been an improvement in the status of the so-called untouchables or harijans or dalits.