

## Overview of Caste and Class in India

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### ABSTRACT

Two main forms of social stratification-caste and class. Both are the agencies of social mobility and selection. They decide largely the position that a man occupies in society. The range of one's social contracts is almost fixed by one's status in society. Caste is associated above all the cultures of the Indian subcontinent. The term 'Caste' itself is not an Indian one, coming from the Portuguese 'Caste' meaning, 'race' or 'pure stock'. Indians themselves have no single term for describing the caste system as a whole but a variety of words referring to different aspects of it, the two main ones being varna and Jati. The Varna consists of four categories, each ranked differently in terms of social honour. Below these four groupings are the 'untouchables', those in the lowest position of all. The Jati are locally defined groups within which the caste ranks are organized. This paper reflects, overview of caste and class in India.

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### 1. Introduction

The caste system is extremely elaborate and varies in its structure from area to area-so much so that it does not really constitute one 'system' at all, but a loosely connected diversity of varying beliefs and practices. But certain principles are widely shared. Those in the highest varna, the Brahmins, represent the most elevated condition of purity, the untouchables the lowest. The Brahmins must avoid certain types of contact with the untouchables, and only the untouchables are allowed physical contact with animals or substances regarded as unclean. The caste system is closely bound up with the Hindu belief in rebirth; individuals who fail to abide by the naturals and duties of their caste, it is believed, will be reborn in an inferior position in their next incarnation. The Indian caste system has never been completely static. Although individuals are debarred from moving between castes, whole groups can change and frequently have changed, their position within the caste hierarchy.

The concept of caste is sometimes used outside the Indian context where two or more ethnic groups are largely segregated from one another, and where notions of racial purity prevail. In such circumstances, there are strong taboos preventing intermarriage between the groups concerned. When slavery was abolished in the southern states of the US, the degree of separation between blacks and whites remained so strong that some have used the term caste to refer to the stratification system. The concept of caste has also been applied to South Africa, where strict segregation was until recently maintained between black and white, and intermarriage or sexual contact between them was forbidden by law.

### 2. Definitions of Caste

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

"A caste is an endogamous group, or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary imposing on its members certain

restrictions in the matters of social intercourse, either following a common traditional occupation or claiming a common origin and generally regarded as forming a single homogeneous community." - E.A.H. Blunt

"A social group having two characteristics - (i) membership is confined to those who are born as members, and includes all persons to be born (ii) the members, are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the groups" - Ketkar

"Caste is a collection of families, group of families bearing a common name, claiming a 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 an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community." - Risley

### 3. Caste System- Characteristics

- 1. Caste is Innate:** Its first distinguishing feature is its absolute rigidity and immobility. A man dies in the same caste in which he is born and it is the caste that determines his status in life.
- 2. Restriction on Food Habits:** The second element of caste is its prescription of certain kinds of food for different castes.
- 3. Caste is Endogamous:** Endogamy is the most important element of caste system. Westermarck considers it to be a chief characteristic of the caste.
- 4. Hierarchical Social Structure:** The caste structure of the society is hierarchy or system of subordination held together by the relations of superiority and inferiority at the apex of which are Brahmins and at the lowest rung are the shudras.
- 5. Occupation is Fixed:** Every caste regards some occupation as its own hereditary and exclusive calling and tries to debar the others from exercising it. The original and exclusive occupation of Brahmins was to perform priestly duties.

#### 4. Recent Trends In Indian Caste System

The caste system in its attempts to adjust itself to the changed conditions of life has assumed new roles. Besides industrialisation and urbanisation, other factors such as Westernisation, Sanskritisation, reorganisation of Indian states, spread of education, socio-religious reforms, spatial and occupational mobility and growth of market economy have greatly affected the caste system. Changes in the role of caste must also be understood in the light of the influence of these factors.

##### 1. Increase in the Organisational Power of Caste :

Education makes people liberal, broad-minded, rational and democratic. Educated people are believed to be less conservative and superstitious. Hence it was expected that with the growth of literacy in India, caste-mindedness and casteism would come down.

##### 2. Political Role of Caste :

Caste and politics have come to affect each other now. Caste has become an inseparable aspect of our politics. In fact, it is tightening its hold on politics. Elections are fought more often on the basis of caste. Selection of candidates, voting analysis, selection of legislative party leaders, distribution of ministerial portfolios etc., are very much based on caste.

##### 3. Protection for Scheduled Castes and other Backward Classes :

The constitution of India has made enough provisions to protect the interests of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. They are offered more political, educational and service opportunities through the reservation policy. Seats are reserved for them from Mandal panchayat to Parliament and in all government departments. Though the reservation policy is against the declared goal of establishment of a casteless society, all political parties have supported it mostly, for political purposes.

##### 4. Sanskritisation and Westernisation :

As M.N. Srinivas has pointed out, two important trends are witnessed in caste - the process of Sanskritisation and that of Westernisation. The former refers to a process in which the lower castes tend to imitate the values, practices and other life-styles of some dominant upper castes.

##### 5. Backward Classes Movement :

The Backward Classes Movement has become a vital political force today. Its influence has changed the political scenario of the country. This movement has made the Brahmins politically weak and insignificant especially in Kerala and Tamilnadu. This movement has also brought pressure on different political parties to create special opportunities for the lowest caste people enabling them to come up to the level of other higher castes. Due to this pressure, Backward Classes Commissions were established at Central and State levels which recommended "reservation" for backward castes/classes.

##### 6. Competitive Role of Castes :

Mutual interdependence of castes which existed for centuries and was reinforced by the institutional system of

"jajmani", is not found today. As M.N. Srinivas points out, the "vertical solidarity" of castes has been replaced by "horizontal solidarity". "Live and let live" policy which was once associated with the caste makes no sense today. On the contrary, each caste looks at the other with suspicion, contempt, and jealousy and finds in it a challenger, a competitor.

##### 7. New attempts to strengthen caste-loyalty, caste-identity, caste-patriotism and caste-mindedness :

Today caste organisations are increasing and are making every attempt to obtain the loyalty of their members and to strengthen their caste-identity and solidarity. Some such attempts can be cited here.

- (i) Though Caste Panchayats are dwindling, caste organisations are on the increase. Some of these organisations have their own written constitutions and managing committees through which they try to preserve some of the caste rules and practices.
- (ii) Caste organisations run their own papers, bulletins, periodicals, monthlies etc., through which they regularly feed information to the members regarding the activities of caste organizations and achievements of caste-members.
- (iii) Attempts are also made to increase caste integration through the establishment of caste-based trusts and trust-units.
- (iv) The occupational castes are making determined efforts to improve the economic conditions of caste members by establishing cooperative credit and industrial societies.
- (v) Caste organisations collect regular subscription from the members, arrange annual conferences, discuss matters and issues affecting caste interests and caste solidarity and organise agitations and protest meetings against the governmental policies if they were to damage caste interests. In states like Bihar, some upper and lower castes have formed their own 'senas' (militant groups) to protect their interests.

##### 5. Reasons For The Changes In Caste System

The caste system has undergone vast changes in modern times. Factors that contribute to the changes in the caste system are briefly examined here.

1. **Uniform Legal System.** The uniform legal system introduced by the British made the Indians feel that "all men are equal before the law" A number of legislations which the British introduced also struck at the root of the caste system. Independent India followed the same legal system.
2. **Impact of Modern Education.** The British introduced the modern secular education in a uniform way throughout India. In independent India educational facilities are extended to all the caste people.
3. **Industrialisation, Urbanisation and Westernisation :** Due to the process of industrialisation number of non-agricultural job opportunities were created. This new economic opportunity weakened the hold of the upper castes people who owned vast lands. People of different castes, classes and religions started working together in factories, offices, workshops etc.

#### 4. Influence of Modern Transport and Communication

**System.** Modern means of transport such as train, bus, ship, aero plane, trucks etc. have been of great help for the movement of men and materials. Caste rules relating to the practice of purity and pollution and untouchability could no longer be observed. Modern means of communication, such as, newspapers, post, telegraph, telephone, radio, television etc., have helped people to come out of the narrow world of caste.

**5. Freedom Struggle and the Establishment of Democracy:** The freedom struggle waged against the British brought all the caste people together to fight for a common cause.

**6. Rise of Non-Brahmin Movement.** A movement against the Brahmin supremacy was launched by Jyothirao Pooley in 1873. This movement became popular in course of time particularly in the South. It created an awareness among the lower castes and instilled in them the feeling of "self-respect".

### 6. Rural and urban society in India- class structure

#### a) Social classes in Rural India

**T.K. Oommen** lists the following five categories.

- (i) **Landlords**, who own but do not cultivate land, either employing intermediaries or leasing out land.
- (ii) **Rich farmers**, who look upon agriculture as a business proposition, produce for the market and for profit, employ wage labour, and supervise rather than cultivate.
- (iii) **Middle peasants**, who cultivate their own land and hire labourers only for certain operations or at certain points of time.
- (iv) **Poor peasants**, who own small and uneconomic holdings and often have to work as parts labourers or as sharecroppers or tenant.
- (v) **Landless agricultural workers** who sell their labour and fully depend on the first three categories for their livelihood. The Indian Communist parties give a fivefold classification.
- (vi) **Landlords (feudal and capitalist)**, who do not take part in manual labour;
- (vii) **Rich peasants**, who participate in manual work, but mainly employ wage labour;
- (viii) **Middle peasants**, who own or lease land which is operated predominantly by their family and also by wage labour.
- (ix) **Poor peasants**, whose main income is derived from land leased or owned, but who employ no wage labour.
- (x) **Agricultural labourers**, who earn their livelihood mainly through selling their labour in agriculture or allied occupations.

Hansa Alavi adopted the three-fold classification of peasants under the heading of rich, middle and poor peasants. In rural areas, classes consist principally of (i) landlords, (ii) tenants, (iii) peasant proprietors, (iv) agricultural labourers and (v) artisans. Now let us examine each of them one by one.

#### b) Social classes in Urban India

In the urban areas social classes comprise principally (i) **capitalists** (commercial and industrial), (ii) **corporate sector** (iii) **professional classes**, (iv) **petty traders and shopkeepers** and (v) **working classes**.

##### i) Commercial and Industrial classes

Under the British rule, production in India became production for the market. As a result of this, internal market expanded and the class of traders engaged in internal trading grew. Simultaneously, India was also linked up with the world market. This led to the growth of a class of merchants engaged in export import business. Thus, there came into being a commercial middle class in the country.

##### ii) The Corporate sector

Any organisation that is under government ownership and control is called as public sector unit and any organisation, which does not belong to public sector can be taken to be a part of private sector. The firms and organisation which are owned, controlled and managed exclusively by private individuals and entities are included in private sector.

##### iii) Professional classes

The new economic and state systems brought about by the British rule required cadres of educated Indians trained in modern law, technology, medicine, economics, administrative science and other subjects. The professional classes comprise modern lawyers, doctors, teachers, managers and others working in the modern commercial and other enterprises, officials functioning in state administrative machinery, engineers, technologists; agriculture scientists, journalists and so on.

##### iv) Petty traders, Shopkeepers and Unorganised workers

In addition to the new classes discussed above, there has also been in existence in urban areas a class of petty traders and shopkeepers. These classes have developed with the growth of modern cities and towns. They constitute the link between the producers of goods and commodities and the mass of consumers.

##### v) Working classes

Origin of the working class could be traced back to the British rule. This was the modern working class which was the direct result of modern industries, railways, and plantations established in India during the British period. This class grew in proportion as plantations, factories, mining, industry, transport, railways and other industrial sectors developed and expanded in India.

### 7. Conclusion

Hindu social organization from time immemorial has revealed the feature of caste system in India. In-depth analysis has shown that the division of the society had been inevitably linked to the occupation, economic production, access to property and wealth. History reflects that caste and class have influenced the Indian society at large. The adaptive nature of the caste system has been all spreading through and all powerful.

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