

UNIT 3 CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In order to understand social stratification caste and class are both very important. After reading this unit you will be able to :

- understand the jati model and explain the role of class in social stratification;
- know the relationship between caste and class;
- understand the role of caste in mobility and elections;
- explain the various facets of caste in social stratification; and
- discuss caste hierarchy and class conflict.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to handle the many difficulties which emerge in the analysis of caste. In fact, the literature on the subject has created more doubts than clarity. One finds a lack of distinction between varna and jati, while different perspectives develop one aspect of analysis at the cost of the other. Conjectural theories too have not been absent, particularly in the writings of the colonial ethnographers who continue to be used today to substantiate evidence. Several analysts popularized the view of Indian society as a "caste society" ignoring the dynamics of existing conditions. They perceived caste to be a logical opposite of the class system which was associated along with individualism, and particularly with the West.

3.2 BASIC FEATURES OF CASTE MODEL

Andre Beteille has outlined the basic features of this perspective of the caste model of Indian society, while examining its usefulness as a scheme of analysis. The features of the 'caste model' are:

- i) It is based on the ideas held and expressed by certain sections of the people and not on observed behaviour, although secondary empirical materials have been used.
- ii) It attaches kind of primary and universal significance to caste in India as this has been conceived in the classical texts.
- iii) The entire system is viewed as being governed by certain more or less explicitly formulated principle or 'rules of the game'.
- iv) The different castes which are the basic units in the system are conceived as fulfilling complementary functions, and their mutual relations are seen as being non-antagonistic.

Andre Beteille points out two dangers emanating from this model. Firstly, that it is so general a theory, that it can actually be applied to any society, and secondly, it fails to take into account the details of economic and political life.

Box 3.01

Beteille observes that the caste model, associated primarily with the work of Louis Dumont, has been found useful in the interpretation of beliefs relating to Hinduism. He considers the study of "interests" equally important in understanding of political and economic problems, and his analysis of caste in a Tanjore village is a good example of such a concern. Yogendra Singh's work has attempted to understand change, where class factors operate within the framework of caste categories with a new sense of identity. In such events, caste violations also occur, pointing to contradictions which were not so visible earlier.

M.N. Srinivas' concept of 'Sanskritization' is one such dominant process of change in the caste system. Sanskritization could be observed in terms of the specific contexts in which it occurs and secondly, as a historical process of change in the caste system as a whole.

Another process of cultural change described by Srinivas is called, 'westernization'. It brings about changes in values, norms and very the cultural roots of the people. Yogendra Singh sees these to have implications for 'structural changes' in the caste system in particular and in Indian society in general, epitomized as 'revolt' against hierarchy, or captured in the modernization process.

3.3 STRUCTURAL CHANGES

These structural changes appear as land reforms, the spread of education, social legislation, democratization, industrialization and urbanization. The effect of these on the caste system is that often, adaptive mechanisms such as caste associations appear as mechanism of social mobilisations. These organizations strive mainly for the fulfillment of materialistic and mundane goals for their members, thereby making them more aware of their deprivation and structural impediments. These associations are often concerned with non-caste like- functions, but they are not classes, since members range across several class situations. Intra-caste contradictions are not allowed to come up, and this may also create a notion of shared deprivations and class consciousness.

3.3.1 Economic Relations

The caste system has also been considered to be a system of economic relations. Joan Mencher writes that for those at the bottom, the caste system has worked as a very systematic tool of exploitation and oppression. One of the functions of the system has been to prevent the formation of classes with any commonality of interest of unity of purpose. Mencher has used "class" in the Marxian sense and adopted the Marxian model to analyze caste relations. As such, caste is a system of exploitation rather than a system of interdependence and reciprocity. Caste stratification has been a deterrent to the development of "class conflict" or "proletarian consciousness". This is because "caste

The most crucial point for consideration is that “classes” are not found as a system of stratification in the same way as castes are entrenched in Indian society. Further, that most of the “problems” created by the caste system are still of a class nature, related to economic domination and subjugation, privileges and deprivations, conspicuous waste and bare survival. These problems are essentially those of the privileged and the dis-privileged and one cannot locate these as concrete groupings in a strictly Marxian sense, as class antagonism, class consciousness and class unity are not present. Thus, India’s situation is very different from other societies in the sense that the problems are of a “class” nature, but “classes” as divisions of society are not found as concrete socio-economic-units.

3.3.2 Power and Dominant Caste

Andre Beteille observes that power has shifted from one dominant caste to another and it is shifted from the caste structure itself, and come to be located in more differentiated structures such as panchayats and political parties. Yet Beteille does not reflect upon the consequences of this shift. Can we study changes in caste structure without examining the consequent patterns of “distributive justice” or “equality/ inequality”? If we cannot analyse the flexibility inherent in the norms of the an egalitarian system, it would be difficult to interpret the emergence of formal institutions and structures as indicators of a “shift” from caste areas to “caste-free” structures. Even if a caste as a whole is not “dominant” and the “dominant group” comprises families of several caste, it does not mean that the magnitude of inequality has substantially reduced.

3.4 CASTE-CLASS NEXUS

My observation is that the change is from one kind of structure of inequality to another. Earlier also caste was characterised by inter-caste differentiation of roles as well as differentiation within particular castes. Thus, differentiation is not necessarily related to the reduction of caste inequalities. Differentiation of roles may bring about certain new inequalities which might strengthen the existing ones, and in such a situation, differentiation becomes a double-edged weapon for the lowest groups in a caste system or for that matter in any type of system. We have a few “proletarian Zamindars” or landlords on the one hand, and also neo-rich “neo-influential” neo zamindars on the other, as a result of the emergence of new structures in the village community.

3.4.1 Synchronic Analysis

Studies on caste have paved the way to a certain fieldwork tradition, which produced ‘synchronic’ analysis. The emphasis had been on presenting caste as an equilibrating, harmonic, stable and consensual system. Change was often presented as a shifted in relations from organic to segmentary, closed to open, harmonic to disharmonic. Yet, empirical evidence seems to suggest that change in the caste system has been adaptive - evolutionary.

Activity 1

Discuss about Synchronic analysis with other students in the study centre. Pen down your findings in your notebook.

Changes in the caste system can be analysed from one structure of inequality and hierarchy to another structure of inequality. To understand this problem of change in the caste system, we should analyse the “composite status” of people of a given society, either taking ‘family’ or ‘individual’ as the unit of analysis or both. Such an approach calls for the consideration of caste as a dynamic process, hence we need methodology for the understanding of the process of transformation. It is in this context that I will now discuss the caste-class nexus.

Both caste and class have been debated from narrow ideological standpoints. According to

the 'caste model' perspective, caste is viewed as an overarching ideological system, encompassing all aspects of social life, of Hindus in particular and of other communities in general. One of the implications of such a view is that caste is basically a part of the infrastructure of Indian society. Thus occupation, division of labour, rules of marriage, interpersonal relations are elements of superstructure, expressing the reproduction of the ideology of caste.

3.4.2 Caste as a Normative System

Following from this we ask the question: In what way is caste a normative system? Why in certain spheres caste adheres to its normative sanctions whereas in other domains, caste groups and their members have taken up activities which depart from traditional sanctions of the caste system? It may be noted that members of a caste compete with each other, but they also co-operate with one another. Class-based distinctions within the caste have always been found in a pronounced form. Members of a caste in a given village can sometimes be representatives of Indian class divisions for while observing all the pertinent rules of marriage, they may actually define pertinent negotiations along the axes of class conditions.



All castes can worship now in Hindu temples

Courtesy: T. Kapur

Caste refers to inequality both in theory and practice. Dumont, in his classic work *Homo Hierarchicus* considers inequality based on the caste system as a special type of inequality. For him the idea of the pure and the impure is basic to the understanding of caste; it is the very basic framework of hierarchy in India. He analysed the "ideal type" of the caste system based on ethnographic and ideological descriptions.

T.N. Madan upholds Dumont's view regarding hierarchy as a universal necessity. He points that society in India has remained largely static, change in society has taken place, but there has been no radical transformation.

3.4.3 Caste as an Empirical Reality

The basis of the understanding the caste system as an empirical reality is to locate caste groups such as jatis in a specific rural/urban context. It is a source of placement and of identity in society. At the latter level, identity is not a function necessarily of informal day to day relations. Caste, for instance, does not usually become a basis of marriage between a Tamil Brahmin and a Kanyakubja Brahmin of Uttar Pradesh. Yet, they may have a sense of belonging to what they perceive as the same stock, and may even co-operate in situations of crises and challenges. Therefore, one may ask: Is caste an interest group? Can common interests bring together more smoothly men of different castes from various regions than those of the same caste? Caste is certainly a resource, but the nature of this resource varies from caste to caste depending upon the status of a given caste in a given area. Caste identity/membership has become a liability for the members of the upper and middle castes because a certain percentage of jobs, seats in parliament and state legislatures, as well as admissions into institutions of higher learning have been reserved for the other backward castes, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

The view that caste and class are ideological opposites is not correct. The assumption that class can emerge as a social reality when caste has been destroyed is an erroneous conception of the relationship between the two. Both have been inseparable parts of India's social formation, and hence the study of their nexus, continuity and change.

Caste is a very complex system, for it is not simply a system of power relations and economic activities in a nominal sense. If it gets weakened in one aspect, it also gets strengthened in another, no doubt with certain alternations, additions and accretions. We need to seriously analyse the dynamics of the system. There is after all a class basis to rituals, pollution-purity and other non-material aspects of social life. For example, an organization like Jat Sabha is not a simple caste association, but in effect, it is an organization of peasants. Similarly, the Kisan Sabha is not a simple organization of peasants, it is very much an association of castes engaged in agriculture, particularly of Jats in northern India, and their counterparts in other states.

Further, to consider caste mainly as a rural phenomenon, and class as a reality belonging to the towns and cities is a myth. Let us look at caste elections in Jaipur city to substantiate our position.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a note on power and the dominant caste. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Discuss, caste as an empirical reality. Use about five lines for your answer.

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3.5 CASTE ELECTIONS

The annual elections of Khandelwal Vaishya Mahasabha were held in the heart of the city on Station Road about fifteen years ago. Hundreds of cars, jeeps autorickshaws and two-wheelers were deployed in the elections. About 60 stalls were installed for electioneering on both sides of the road. Traffic was diverted and police pickets were posted to control the situation. It was not only a show of casteism, but also of factionalism within the caste. What would those elected get out of all this by spending lakhs of rupees on the elections? One should seriously engage in empirical analysis to understand how caste and class interact to seek an answer to this question.

Box 3.02

There is no uniform pattern of caste structure in actual terms throughout India. There are thousands of castes in India with different names and nomenclatures, but there exist only five or six classes throughout the country. It is important to remember that these apparently distinct bases of social division in Indian society are not realistically very different from each other. There are numerous middle classes which are not directly related to production processes and they are an offshoot of the modern Indian state apparatus.

In India, class-struggle is also in effect caste-struggle and vice-versa. Separation of the two seems to be superfluous and mechanistic. A nomological plea that the two are distinct as they refer to different "social" and "economic" realities cannot be accepted because of the lack of ample substantive support and evidence about the two as separate entities.

This approach which focuses on the caste-class nexus for studying India's social formation would focus on the understanding and analysis of structure, culture, history and dialectics both from the upper levels of strata, as well as the marginalized communities.

Nexus does not imply a correspondence or symmetry between caste and class. Interdependence, contradictions, symmetry and hegemony of social relations are integral features of this nexus. Andre Beteille notes that the hierarchies of caste and power in the village overlap to some extent, but also cut across.

Beteille also states that many areas of social life are now becoming to some extent "caste-free". Besides the Brahminic tradition, the idea of the martial Rajput, the traditions of the Indian craftsman, the Indian merchant, and class and cultural traditions existed side by side in the Indian society.

We admit that due to the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the caste system, one encounters numerous difficulties in giving a precise definition of caste. The structural aspect of the caste is explained by describing it as a general principle of stratification. Caste as a cultural system is understood in terms of the prominence of ideas on pollution and purity and notions of hierarchy, segregation and corporateness.

F.G. Bailey views caste as a closed system of stratification, whereas Beteille considers aspects of the caste system as both 'closed' and 'open'. We have seen that Bailey finds that caste is becoming increasingly segmentary because of the emergence of differentiated structures in India. These analytic variations hinder a common definition of caste.

3.5.1 Caste and Mobility

Although caste is not really a very flexible system, yet a caste permits mobility in certain areas to its members. A given caste is guided by the norms of the caste system regarding inter-caste dependence. However, any given caste has also its autonomy with regard to the observance of its practices, rituals and rights in relation to other castes.

Srinivas notes that even today agricultural production requires co-operation of several castes. The use of the caste idiom is quite widespread (1966). Marx related the Asiatic

mode of production to the stability of the caste system in India. Beteille blames Dumont in particular for encouraging a "caste-view" of Indian society. Such a 'caste model' according to Beteille does not provide an analysis of material interests along with the study of ideas and values. There is a dialectical relationship between the two, and Dumont and Pocock's notion of 'binary opposition' is far from the notion of 'dialectics' as given by Marx. Beteille also suggests that economic and political conflicts occur with a certain degree of autonomy of their own, hence they could be studied independent of caste and religious beliefs and ideas. The caste model would not permit such a path of understanding. Edmund Leach's understanding that co-operation refers to caste, and competition refers to class is naïve and unconvincing. Not only families of dominant castes compete with each other to extend patronage to the lower castes for maintaining their dominance, but the lower caste families too compete to seek favours from the families of the dominant castes. Such competition is really not a new phenomenon. Even feuds due to conflicting claims on territory were quite common among the Kshatriyas and Brahmins for seeking power in ancient and medieval India. Leach's view that caste was merely 'caste' and a 'class-like situation' emerged only when the patrons started competing with each other (1960: 1-10) ignores the fact that inter-caste conflicts and revolts by lower castes against the upper castes have been a historical fact.

3.6 EXPLAINING CLASS

Marxist notions of class and class-conflict have become hallmarks of the studies of India's agricultural and urban-industrial structures. Marx himself discussed caste and the traditional ethos of village community in his two articles on India. Initially Marx characterised the Asiatic mode of the production as an absence of private property in land and the static nature of economy (1947) due to a certain tie-up between caste, agriculture and village handicrafts. However, C.T. Kurian observes that that the analysis of the Asiatic mode does not deny the role of class contradictions and class structures. India's pre-capitalist economic formation was based on both caste and class side by side.

Two questions are relevant for a discussion on class: (i) what method can we use for analysing the class structure in Indian society? And (ii) what is the class-caste nexus, and its ramifications and inter-relations in each region? The purpose of discussing these questions is not to accept or reject the Marxian approach but to see what useful insights it provides us.

Ashok Rudra, while analyzing the class composition of the Indian agricultural population, observes that there are only two classes in Indian agriculture — the big landlords, and the agricultural labourers. These two classes are in antagonistic relationship with each other, and this constitutes the principal contradiction in Indian rural society (1978: 916-23). Similar to Rudra's view is that held by A.R. Desai (1975).

Box 3.03

Rudra emphatically argues that Indian agriculture has capitalist relations and capitalist development. Hence, there are two classes — 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The State in India has assumed the norms of capitalist society as the axis of its developmental strategy. One of the implications of this formulation is that the frame of reference which applies to the rest of the world also applies very well to the Indian society. The other inference is that the dominant variable for analysis of Indian society is the economic in all situations and contexts.

In India, V.M. Dandekar observes that strikes by wage earners is a very common feature, and they include those earning from two hundred rupees to those who have salaries upto several thousands. Hence wage-earners must be seen as a heterogeneous category.

About three-fourths of the workforce are left out by the Marxian yardstick. The Indian state, being a welfare state, is the largest employer today. Is the Indian state a capitalist, exploitative and oppressive agency just like an industrialist or an employer of wage earners? About 10 million workers are engaged in small industries and family-owned

concerns, and these workers generally do not witness class-antagonism and strikes. The organised labour is one-ninth of the total workforce. Can we accept the Marxian approach? Overlapping of class, caste and occupation, elite conflict, pressure groups and factions, influence of middle classes and the prevalence of 'mixed classes' and 'gentlemen farmers' are some the important elements to be taken into account for a serious analysis of India's class structure. The jajmani system too can be explained in terms of class relations and the mode of production. Let us now look at caste hierarchy and occupation.

3.7 CASTE HIERARCHY AND CLASS-CONFLICT

The dalits have been attacked, murdered, their women-folk raped and inflicted upon with various indignities. Arun Sinha observes that it is 'class war' against Harijans and not haphazard atrocities. In a dispatch to Economic and Political Weekly, Sinha observes that 'in the villages of Bihar, the rise of a rich peasant class has driven agricultural labourers of all castes—Chamars, Dusaudhs, Kurmis, Yadavs, Bhumihars and so on, to forsake their caste organizations and fight along trade union lines. This is to read as "class war" cutting across caste lines. But the fact is that Harijan or Chamar agricultural labourers cannot simply be equated with his Brahmin or Bhumihar counterpart because the two have the same position in the class structure.

The real situation in post-independent India is that a class of rich peasants from the backward castes is at the top of the class hierarchy. This class is struggling against the social and political domination of the upper castes. The backward classes received encouragement for accelerating their struggle against the upper castes during the Janata government regime in Bihar. The backward classes are at level in the caste hierarchy and so is their position in class structure.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain class as a social phenomenon. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Outline caste hierarchy and class conflict. Use about five lines for your answer.

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The Janata rule brought about a shift in the structure of dominance in Bihar having implications for the political economy of the State. The Brahmins lost their political dominance substantially.

3.7.1 Incidence of Violence and Exploitation

The incidents of massacre, loot and rape of the women of scheduled castes in Belchi, Agra, Pantnagar, Marathwada and Bajitpur, among other places, show the role of the caste system vis-à-vis class struggle and class organization as reported by the Atyachar Virodhi Samiti. The Samiti investigated the nature and extent of repression of scheduled castes in Maharashtra. The SCs were also poor peasants and agricultural labourers. The specific oppression and exploitation of the rural poor women, both sexually and materially particularly of the dalit women, have been highlighted in the report by the Samiti. The findings and observations of the Samiti on caste are quite meaningful as caste is seen as a system of relations of production. The ongoing conflict between Ranbir Sena and an ultra-left outfit in Bihar has led to killings and counter-killings of the poor low caste people and the upper caste Bhunihars in particular. The following points may be noted:

- i) The caste system functions as an extremely effective method of economic exploitation. The dominant class also acquires political power and social prestige which further perpetuates and consolidates caste hierarchy. Thus, caste hierarchy reflects ownership of land, and economic hierarchy is closely linked with social hierarchy.
- ii) Caste determines a definite relation to the means of production and subsistence specially in rural areas. Caste riots reflect the conflict of class interests.
- iii) Caste also refers to the relations of production as it controls the access of groups and individuals to the conditions of production of production and to the resources, and provide the social framework for politico-ritual activity.
- iv) B.R. Ambedkar rightly observed that the caste system was not merely a division of labour, but also a division of labourers. However, caste prevents labourers from being a class-for-itself. Hence caste is to be viewed as an ideology in the manner of 'false consciousness'. I have observed that both caste and class have played a significant role in the emergence of dalit identity and movement.
- v) Caste and religion are used to perpetuate a particular class structure.
- vi) Caste persists as a part of feudal ideology.

Activity 2

With reference to the points i) — vi) above discuss with other students the present state of the caste system. Note down your answer in a notebook.

The Samiti further states that "caste is one of the most important aspects of Indian society. It represents a specific form of oppression at the level of relations of production". To say that there are only class issues, and there is nothing like questions pertaining to caste, is totally absurd. Because caste divisions beyond purely 'economic' class do still persist. So issues around specific caste questions must be taken by all the progressive and leftists, dalits and non-dalits and organizations. The reality today is of class interest, developing alongside caste oppression and class exploitation.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

The structural aspects of caste, namely, economic and political dimensions have remained underestimated. So also analysis of the cultural aspects of social stratification can provide a deeper understanding of India's social formation, since the two are in fact inseparable from each other. As we have noted, classes function within the contexts of castes, caste conflicts are also class or agrarian conflicts. The rifts between the upper and the lower castes to a large extent correspond with conflicts between landowners and sharecroppers or agricultural labourers.

Four basic points for the understanding of caste and class relations and their transformations may be noted. These are: (i) dialectics, (ii) history, (iii) culture, and (iv) structure.

Dialectics do not simply refer to binary fission in the cognitive structure of the society. It refers to the effective notions which bring about contradictions and highlights relations between unequal segments and men and women. History is not conjectural based on mythology, scriptures and idealistic constructions, but it provides a substantial account of existent conditions of work and relationships. Culture does not include just cultural practices, rituals, rites of passage etc., it defines the rules of the game, the nature of relations between the privileged and the deprived, and modes of resistance or consensus. Structure is no doubt a product of dialectical contradictions, historical forces and certain rules of the game, but it becomes 'formation' once it has emerged, and in return, becomes a sort of 'force' to determine in some way the course of history. Thus structure refers to relations between social segments as a point of time, but more as a historical product and reality. Having these elements as the kernel of structural-historical approach, changes in caste and class structure could be considered as "transformational processes".

The following processes of structural changes emanating from the above paradigmatic explanations may be noted:

- i) Downward mobility and proletarianisation,
- ii) Upward mobility and embourgeoisement,
- iii) Urban income for rural people and mobility in the village.
- iv) Rural non-agricultural income and mobility.

These are themes which require much attention if we are to achieve a more complete understanding of caste and class in India.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Caste: An ascriptive grouping with several characteristics including an allegiance to the varna all-India scheme.

Synchronic: An event or analysis which is happening, or done simultaneously with another event or analysis.

3.10 FURTHER READINGS

Beteille, Andre, 1965, *Caste, Class and Power*, Bombay, Oxford University Press.

Ghurye, G.S., 1961, *Caste, Class and Occupation*, Bombay, Popular Book Depot. Earlier this book was published under titles – Caste and Race and Caste and Class.

Singh, Yogendra, 1973, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, Faridabad, Thompson Press (India) Ltd.

Srinivas, M.N., 1966, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley, California University Press.

3.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Beteille has observed that power shifts from one dominant caste to another. Further power has how come to be located in move differential structures such as panchayats

and political parties. It has been observed by K L Sharma that the change has been from one kind of structure of inequality to another.

- 2) To understand caste system as an empirical reality is to put caste groups such as jatis in a specific rural/urban context. This creates a placement in society and provides identity. Identity may not be a function of day to day interactions. Thus while two caste groups may not intermarry they may have a sense of belonging to the same stock and cooperate in crises and challenges.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Marxist notions of caste have been widely used in the study of India's agricultural and urban industrial structures. It has been pointed out that India's precapitalist formation was based both on caste and class. Various writers have used class in their analyses in agriculture including Rudra and Dandekar.
- 2) It is found that those at the lower end of the caste hierarchy have been systematically attacked. Sinha feels that this is a 'class war' and not incidental atrocities. The actual situation in post-independent India is that a class of rich peasants of the backward classes is at the top of the class hierarchy. This class is struggling against the social and political domination of the upper classes, with some success.