# 27

CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

*A*fter understanding the basic features of Indian society and its various aspects like tribal, rural and urban, in this lesson you will go through an important aspect of Indian social institutions, i.e. caste system. In this lesson you will learn the basic features of caste system, the differences between Varna and Jati, Caste and Class, the changing aspect of caste system and concepts like sanskritisation, westernisation, and dominant caste. The word caste has its origin from the Spanish word 'casta', meaning 'race', or 'a group having hereditary quality'. The term was applied to people of India by the Portuguese to denote 'Jati'. The word caste has created confusion in the sense that it is used to denote both Varna and Jati. As you must have known, people saying that there are four castes – *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra*. In fact these four are not castes but are Varnas. What we find today are not Varnas but Jatis. There are four Varnas and about 4000 Jatis (the distinction between Varna and Jati will be clear later on in this chapter). We use the term caste here in this chapter to denote Jati.

OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- define caste system;
- describe the features of caste system;
- differentiate between Varna and jati;
- differentiate between caste and class; and
- state the changes in the caste system.
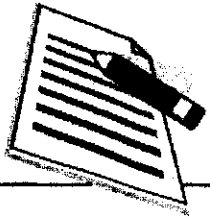
Notes

27.1 DEFINATION OF CASTE

Caste can be defined as hereditary endogamous group, having a common name, common traditional occupation, common culture, relatively rigid in matters of mobility, distinctiveness of status and forming a single homogeneous community. However, in the changing situation caste has adapted to many new features like having formal organisations, becoming less rigid and having a link with politics. Thus we may list from the above the following features of caste system.

(i) **Segmental division of society** – It means Indian social stratification is largely based on caste. There are various castes having a well-developed life style of their own. The membership of a caste is determined by birth. Thus caste is hereditary in nature.

(ii) **Hierarchy** – It indicates various castes according to their purity and impurity of occupations, are ranked from higher to lower positions. It is like a ladder where pure caste is ranked on the top and impure is ranked at the bottom. For example the occupation of Brahmins is that of performing rituals and teaching. It is considered to be the purest occupation; hence they are placed at the top of the hierarchy. On the other hand Sweeper whose occupation is cleaning and scavenging, is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy because of impure occupation.

(iii) **Restrictions on food, drink and smoking** – Usually different caste do not exchange food and drink, and do not share smoking of *hukka* among them. For instance, Brahmins do not take food from any other caste. It is a complicated process. For eexample in Uttar Pradesh, among Kanyakubj Brahmins, there are many sub-divisions. Each sub-division does not take food from other sub-division. There are two types of food: '*pucca*' (food prepared in ghee like *puri*, *kachodi* and *pulao*) and *kuchcha* (food prepared in water like rice, pulses, and vegetables curries). Some castes exchange only *pucca* food among themselves. Invariably, the high caste does not take anything from the low caste. The same principle is applied to smoking.

(iv) **Endogamy** – It indicates members of the caste have to marry within their own caste only. Inter-caste marriages are prohibited. However, among educated people, particularly in the urban areas, inter-caste marriages are gradually increasing.

(v) **Purity and pollution** – It is one of the important features of caste system. Purity and pollution are judged in terms of deeds, occupation, language, dress patterns, as well as food habits. For example liquor consumption, consuming non-vegetarian food, eating left-over food of the high castes, working in occupations like leather craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and

carrying garbage etc. are supposed to be impure. However, in recent times some high caste people are today doing all the above jobs, like working in a shoe-shop, shoe-factory, cutting hair in a beauty parlour etc.

(vi) **Occupational association** – Each caste has a specific occupation and can not change the occupation. For instance, Brahmins do priesthood and teaching, Kayasthas maintain revenue records and writing. Baniyas are engaged in business and Chamars are engaged in leatherwork, etc. With new job opportunities available due to industrialisation and urbanization some people have shifted from their traditional occupation. However, in rural areas traditional occupations are still followed. Such cases are also found in urban areas like a barber has a hair-cutting saloon where he cuts hair in the morning and evening and simultaneously works as a peon in some office.

(vii) **Social and religious disabilities and privileges of a few sections** – The lower caste are debarred from doing many things like they are not permitted to enter the temple, do not use literary language and can not use gold ornaments or umbrella etc. However, things have changed considerably, these restrictions are hardly found today.
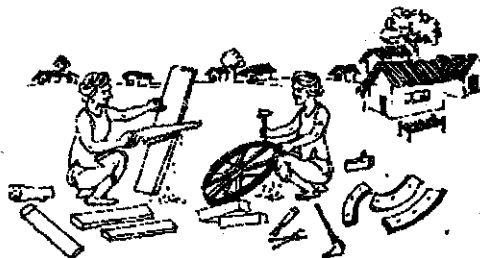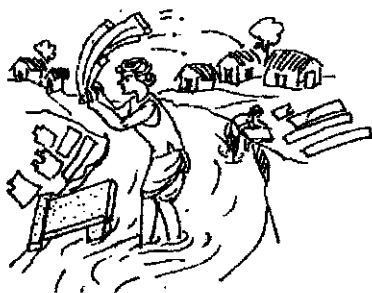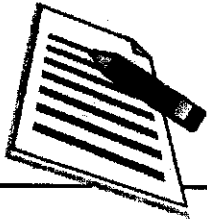

Different castes doing different occupation

(viii) **Distinction in custom, dress and speech** – Each caste has distinct style of life, i.e. having its own customs, dress patterns and speech. The high caste use pure language (sometimes use literary words), whereas, the low caste use colloquial (local) language.
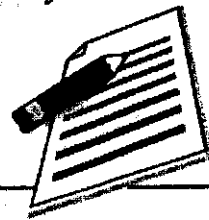
Notes

(ix) **Conflict resolving mechanisms** – The caste's have their own conflict resolving mechanisms such as Caste Panchayats at the village and inter-village levels.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 27.1

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words from the brackets:

(i) *Pucca* food is prepared in _____ (leaves, water, ghee)

(ii) The occupation of Brahmins is _____ (leatherwork, priesthood, business).

(iii) Untouchables are today identified as _____ (OBC, Savarana, Dalits)

(iv) Membership of a caste is _____ (hereditary, achieved, transferred).

27.2 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VARNA AND JATI

As mentioned earlier there are four Varnas. The first mention of Varna is found in Rig-Veda, i.e. in the Vedic era around 1500 BC. Varna means colour. Initially there were no untouchables. The Varna system was relatively not rigid during the Vedic era (1500BC – 1000BC). During the later Vedic era, i.e. around 1000BC there has been a mention of "Asat Shudra" (untouchable community). Thus untouchability started around 1000BC. Around 2nd century BC to 1st century AD, because of diversified occupations, several occupational groups emerged and came to be known by different Jatis. Thus Varna Vyavastha is the textual model or book view of Indian social system, i.e. it is found today only in texts. Whereas, Jati is the contextual view or field view of Indian social system, i.e. we find Jatis in reality today and not Varnas. There are only four Varnas whereas, there are about 4000 Jatis. In each region about 200 Jatis are found. The Varna had a pan-Indic hierarchy, i.e. Brahmins are on the top, Kshtriyas are at the second position, Vaishyas are at the third position and Shudras are found in the bottom of the hierarchy. This hierarchy was uniform throughout India but in Jati a uniform hierarchy throughout India is not found. In the changing situation, in some areas Brahmins are on the top, in some other areas Thakurs (Rajput) are at the top. Today even the Dalits are found on the top in some areas. Thus secular criteria (economic and political) are found in the Jati system. On the other hand in Varna vyavastha ritual criteria (religious) is found. In Varna vyavastha intially untouchable are not found. They are placed outside the Varna vyavastha, whereas, in the Jati
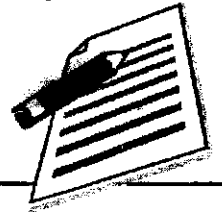
vyavastha untouchables are an integral part of the system. In Varna vyavastha a person's status was not changeable, whereas, in the Jati vyavastha one can change one's status with improved socio-economic condition. Thus one should not take Varna and Jati synonymously.

27.3 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CASTE AND CLASS

While a caste is hereditary, a class is non-hereditary in nature. A class system allows both exogamy and endogamy, permits mobility either up or down the system, and also allows an individual to remain in the status to which he was born. Thus a class is primarily based on socio-economic criteria. There are three major classes found: Upper, Middle, and Lower. Each class is divided into two sub-divisions. They are upper-upper, and lower upper; upper-middle and lower-middle; and upper-lower and lower-lower. A class is more open than the caste in the sense that mobility is allowed in the class system. It is not allowed that openly in the caste system. Further, caste system is based on ritual criterion whereas, class is based on secular criterion. Ritual criterion means it is based on religious myths, secular means non-religious criterion like economic, political and social criterion. However, in changing circumstances caste is also adapting to secular criteria. Consciousness is found in the class but not necessarily in the caste. However, today castes are also changing into classes in urban areas particularly in terms of economic criterion.

INTEXT QUESTION 27.2

Match the following:

(i) Pan-Indic ·   Jati

(ii) Achieved status   Class

(iii) Untouchables   Varna

(iv) Four Thousand Groups   Dalit

27.4 CHANGES IN THE CASTE SYSTEM

Changes in the caste system have been found in the last two centuries in general and in past 50 years in particular. Several processes like sanskritisation, westernisation, modernisation, dominant caste, industrialisation, urbanisation and

democratic decentralisation have made consequent changes in the caste system. They are as follows:

(i) **Sanskritization:** It is a process by which any low caste could adapt to the behaviour pattern, style of life, and culture of high caste and claim membership in that high caste. But they have to leave their unclean occupation and other impure habits like meat eating and taking liquor, etc. The untouchables were not allowed to sanskritize their status. Thus only middle castes could sanskritize themselves. For sanskritization, a caste must have three conditions: (a) it should have a touchable status, (b) it should have better economic condition, (c) it should make a claim to membership into a high caste, by propagating some story or myth. It is a group process and not an individual process. It is a lengthy process and not an overnight process. It does not lead to any structural change, only leads to positional change. It means a particular low caste changes its position into a high caste in a particular area, whereas the caste structure does not change. Through this process a few lower castes in different parts of country have changed their status into higher castes.

> The Jatavs of Agra wanted to sanskritize in the 1940s. They are Chamars by caste. During the British period, demand on shoes went up and the Jatavs became economically well off. They claimed the Kshatriya status by propagating a myth: in the Lomesh Ramayan written by Swami Atma Ram; it was mentioned that during Treta Yug the Jatavs were Kshatriyas. When Parshuram was slaying the Kshatriyas, the Jatavs hided in the forest and started working with leather craft to save themselves. Now that they have become economically better off, hence they want to get back their Kshatriya status. But the local Kshatriyas refused to accede to their claim since they were untouchables. Later on the Jatavs adapted to politicization and gradually became a vote bank in the areas. Today Jatavs are dominant in the area. Thus unsuccessful sanskritisation led to politicization and upward mobility of the caste.

(ii) **Westernisation:** It indicates adapting to western style of living, language, dress pattern, and behaviour pattern. In India largely the British influence has been found. The features of westernisation are: (a) rational outlook (scientific and goal oriented outlook), (b) interest in material progress, (c) reliance on modern communication process and mass media, (d) English medium education, (e) high social mobility, etc. The higher castes were first
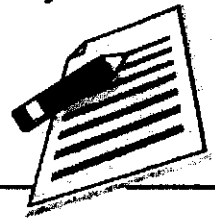
to westernise themselves. Later on, the lower castes also adapted to this process. It has largely influenced the rigidity of caste system and changed it into a flexible system, particularly in the urban areas.

(iii) **Modernisation:** It is a process which primarily relies on scientific outlook; rational attitudes, high social mobility, mass mobilisation, empathy, belief in liberty, equality and fraternity; high level of motivation to do every thing with perfection; specialisation and super-specialisation in work; active participation; and dealing with complex organisations. It also requires changes in institutional, structural, attitudinal, and organisational aspects at the social, cultural and personal level. This has affected greatly the caste system in the sense that it has become more flexible. In urban areas castes are gradually becoming classes. In India we find an emerging middle class with a rational outlook and goal orientation. Modernisation is a broader concept than westernisation. Any culture can modernise itself without adapting to western values. In our case we can modernise ourselves not by abandoning the tradition totally but by integrating the rational aspects of the tradition and suitable aspects of modernity. Our caste system has adapted suitably to the modern practices, i.e. educating people, forming formal organisations and making people conscious about their existence.

(iv) **Dominant caste:** In the 20th century, the phenomena of dominant caste has emerged. It means some caste becomes economically and politically dominant and virtually rules over other castes in the region. A caste can become dominant by having the features like: (a) large land holdings in the area (good economic position), (b) politically dominant (becoming a vote bank), (c) having a large population, (d) high ritual status, (e) English medium education, (f) having a tradition in agriculture (not tillers but landlords), and (g) having a tradition of violence (for dominance muscle power is essential). However, today it is not limited to the high caste only but has been found among the lower castes also.

(v) **Industrialisation and urbanisation:** Both these processes have affected the caste system. With the growth of industrial towns and other cities, migration to these areas has gone up. In these areas following strict caste rules are not possible. There are public places like parks, restaurants, canteens, hotels, offices and communication systems like buses and trains etc. where inter-dinning and sharing of places are essential. Hence, a flexible approach has been adapted.

(vi) **Democratic decentralization:** Through the introduction of Panchayati Raj, local self-governments have been created in the villages. In the Panchayat
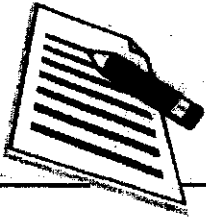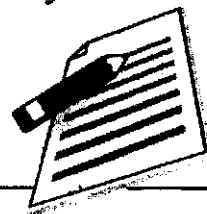
reservation has been made for the lower castes. This has given an opportunity for the lower castes to empower themselves.

(vii) **Caste and politics:** It is not a new phenomenon since politics is a part of life always. During the Varna vyavastha, Brahminical supremacy was an example of politics. Today it is said that castes have a close link with politics because castes have become vote banks, castes have become politically aware, there have been identification of castes with political parties and every caste has its own association. In fact, the link between caste and politics has led to an empowerment among the lower castes. These castes never had any opportunities to express themselves. Today they ventilate their feelings through elections and power lobby. Dalit politics is one such example, where the Dalits are trying to assert their identities and have become successful in capturing power in various States. However, the negative aspects of this link has been found in factionalism, i.e. the high castes always want to maintain their status quo. They are not able to accept the changing dominant position of the lower castes. This has led to frequent conflicts between high castes and low castes in several regions of the country. However, this is only a transitional phase. Better education, mass awareness campaign and good employment opportunities would ensure smooth passage towards a progressive society.

(viii) **Caste and economy:** Traditionally, it was said that caste system has been functional for the society particularly in the economic sense. It is nothing but the *Jajmani* system. It is a system of traditional occupation for the lower castes, particularly the service caste. The service caste is known as *Kamin* and they used to provide service to the higher castes known as *Jajmans*. The *Kamins* provided specialized skills and services to the *Jajmans* and in return used to get rewards in kinds (food grains). The relationship between *Jajmans* and *Kamins* used to be a permanent and hereditary relationship i.e. after the death of the *Jajman*, his son used to be a *Jajman* and the same principle applied to the *Kamins*. Thus it was a functional relationship in village India. However, due to introduction of market economy and land reforms the *Jajmani* system gradually is being eroded.

In this manner, caste system has undergone many changes due to the above processes and it has adapted to the new socio-economic condition. In urban areas, today people do not adhere to caste norms. The only aspect where caste comes is that during marriage they still become endogamous. However, as mentioned earlier, some people have adopted to inter-caste marriage and inter-religious marriages.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 27.3

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate word from the brackets;

(i) Sanskritisation means _____ caste becoming high caste (lower, middle, upper).

(ii) Westernisation means adapting to _____ values (Japanese, Western, Indian).

(iii) Modernisation means having a _____ outlook (traditional, conservative, rational).

(iv) A dominant caste has a _____ population (large, small, very small).

WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- In this lesson you have learnt about the main basis of Indian social structure, i.e. the caste system.

- The caste system is an age-old phenomenon of Indian society.

- In the past it produced harmony between various groups by exchange of goods and services. It exhibited a good division of labour of work.

- However, the practice of untouchability was criticized.

- Several changes have occurred in the caste system due to the processes of sanskritization, westernisation, modernisation, democratic decentralisation, industrialization and urbanisation etc.

- The caste system has adapted to the above processes in urban areas. Caste system has also adapted to some of the features of the class systems.

TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What are the differences between Varna and Jati?

2. Discuss briefly the differences between caste and class.

3. What is sanskritisation?

4. Discuss the features of a dominant caste.

Notes

ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

27.1
(i)   Varna

(ii)   Class

(iii)   Dalit

(iv)   Jati

27.2
(i)   Ghee

(ii)   Priesthood

(iii)   Dalit

(iv)   Hereditary

27.3
(i)   Lower

(ii)   Western

(iii)   Rational

(iv)   Large