Caste in India

The term 'Caste' is derived from a Portuguese word 'Casta' meaning breed, race or group.

According to G.S.Ghurye "Castes are small and complete social worlds in themselves marked off definitely from one another though subsisting within the larger society. "

According to Ghurye, Caste is hierarchical. Theoretically, brahmins occupy the top position and Shudras occupy the bottom. The castes can be graded and arranged into a hierarchy on the basis of their social precedence. The hierarchy present in caste system is reflected through the division of labor in society.

Characteristics of the Caste System:

1. Segmental Division of Society:

Under caste system, society is divided into several small social groups called castes. Each of these castes is a well developed social group, the membership of which is based on birth.

Since membership is based on birth, mobility from one caste to another is impossible. Each caste has its own traditional social status, occupation, customs, rules and regulations. It has its own governing body called the caste council or 'jati panchayat' , which enforces the caste rules. Above all, members of a caste are bound together by mutual obligations of help and co-operation in their day to day activities. Thus each caste is a social world by itself.

A Particular Name: Every caste has a particular name though which we can identify it. Sometimes, an occupation is also associated with a particular caste.

2. Hierarchy:

The caste system is always characterized by a hierarchical arrangement. It implies that there are some castes which are considered superior to the others. Membership in the caste is based on birth and is more or less fixed.

Traditionally it is the hierarchical arrangement of caste according to different degrees of dominance and subordination. The Brahmins in India are placed on the apex of the social ladder. A Brahmin is entitled to whatever exists in this world. In the caste hierarchy the Brahmins are followed by the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. At the bottom of the ladder are the Shudras.

According to Louis Dumont, castes teach us a fundamental social principle of hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy is the Brahmin caste and at the bottom is the untouchable caste. In between are the intermediate castes, the relative positions of which are not always clear.

3. Restrictions on Interaction:

In the caste system, there are several restrictions on interaction. The members of one caste cannot mix or move freely with the members of the other castes. This ban on interaction becomes still more rigid when the question of mixing of a superior caste with an inferior one comes to the front. Every caste abides by well-established customs and well-defined norms of interaction.

Restriction on Food and Drink: Usually a caste would not accept cooked food from any other caste that stands lower than itself in the social scale, due to the notion of getting polluted. There were also variously associated taboos related to food. The cooking taboo, which defines the persons who may cook the food. The eating taboo which may lay down the ritual to be followed at meals. The commensal taboo which is concerned with the person with whom one may take food. Finally, the taboo which has to do with the nature of the vessel (whether made of earth, copper or brass) that one may use for drinking or cooking. For eg: In North India Brahmin would accept pakka food (cooked in ghee) only from some castes lower than his own. However, no individual would accept kachcha(cooked in water) food prepared by an inferior caste.

Food prepared by Brahmin is acceptable to all, the reason for which domination of Brahmins in the hotel industry for a long time. The beef was not allowed by any castes, except harijans.

4. Social and Religious Disabilities:

In caste system, the members of a higher caste impose certain disabilities and restrictions on other castes. In the Hindu caste system, the Brahmins are the most privileged caste and the Sudras are the oppressed ones. A Sudra cannot even touch an individual belonging to a higher caste. People belonging to the lowest caste in the hierarchy are not allowed to dwell in the cities and purchase property in the localities inhabited by the high caste people. They are not allowed even to go to the temples and worship there. They are not even permitted to study religious books etc. they are not also allowed to use village wells or ponds, used by the higher castes.

5. Imposition on restrictions on commensality:

Each caste group has its own laws which govern the food habits of the members. Generally, there are no restrictions on fruit, milk, butter, dry fruits etc. But there are some restrictions regarding unfried food. Unfried food has been divided into two classes, ‘pacca’ and ‘kachcha’. This division is based on the use of ‘ghee’ with or without water. The kachcha food can be accepted only from a person of one’s own caste or of a higher caste.

6. The Ideology of purity and pollution:

The higher castes are believed to be pure and the lower caste people as impure. A central point in Hindu ritual is that it is necessary to make offering to the gods in order for human affairs to continue without undue disaster.

The Concept of Purity and Pollution: The higher castes claimed to have ritual, spiritual and racial purity which they maintained by keeping the lower castes away through the notion of pollution. The idea of pollution means a touch of lower caste man would pollute or defile a man of higher caste. Even his shadow is considered enough to pollute a higher caste man.

The Brahmin or the priest acts as an intermediary between the general society and the gods. The lower castes are regarded as less pure and more polluted. This concept of dividing people in terms of pollution and purity was given by the famous Anthropologist Louis Dumont.

7. Restrictions on Occupations:

The different castes are usually associated with traditional occupations. Hindu religious texts determined the occupations of all 'Varnas'. One's birth into a particular caste determines his occupation during his life time. A Sudra cannot be engaged in the profession of a priest and a Brahmin is debarred to engage himself in impure occupations like making shoes which is the occupation of the lower castes.

8. Marital Restrictions:

Endogamy is the chief characteristic of caste, i.e. the members of a caste or sub-caste should marry within their own caste or sub-caste. The violation of the rule of endogamy would mean ostracism and loss of caste. However, hypergamy (the practice of women marrying someone who is wealthier or of higher caste or social status.) and hypogamy (marriage with a person of lower social status) were also prevalent. Gotra exogamy is also maintained in each caste. Every caste is subdivided into different small

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Caste endogamy is strictly enforced wherein the members of each caste marry only within their own caste. Inter-caste marriage is prohibited.

9. Hereditary Status:

Caste system is based on the ascriptive pattern which implies that the birth of a person in a particular caste decided his caste and his status in society. It is usually difficult or rather impossible to change one's own caste despite the acquisition of qualifications or disqualifications, the membership of a particular caste continues and does not undergo any change

Megasthenes, the Greek traveller to India in 300 B. C., mentions hereditary occupation as one of the two features of caste system, the other being endogamy.