



Introduction

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Chapter 3 Social Institutions continuity and change

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Caste and the Caste System

'Caste' is the name of an ancient social institution that has been part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years.

Caste is an institution uniquely associated with the Indian sub-continent.

Although it is an institution characteristic of Hindu society, caste has spread to the major non-Hindu communities of the Indian sub-continent. This is specially true of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

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Caste and the Caste System

As is well-known, the English word 'caste' is actually a borrowing from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning pure breed.

The word refers to a broad institutional arrangement that in Indian languages (beginning with the ancient Sanskrit) is referred to by two distinct terms, *varna* and *jati*.

Varna, literally 'colour', is the name given to a four-fold division of society into *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *Shudra*.

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Caste and the Caste System

- Vama excludes a significant section of the population composed of the 'outcastes', foreigners, slaves, conquered peoples and others, sometimes referred to as the panchamas or fifth category.
- Jati is a generic term referring to species or kinds of anything, ranging from inanimate objects to plants, animals and human beings.
- The four vama classification is common to all of India, the jati hierarchy has more local classifications that vary from region to region.

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Caste in the Past

In its earliest phase, in the late Vedic period roughly between 900-500 BC, the caste system was really a vama system and consisted of only four major divisions. These divisions were not very elaborate or very rigid, and they were not determined by birth.

It is only in the post Vedic period that caste became the rigid institution that is familiar to us from well-known definitions.

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Caste in the Past

The most commonly cited defining features of caste are the following:

- Caste is determined by birth a child is "born into" the caste of its parents. One can never change one's caste, leave it, or choose not to join it, although there are instances where a person may be expelled from their caste.

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Caste in the Past

Membership in a caste involves strict rules about marriage, Caste groups are "endogamous", i.e. marriage is restricted to members of the group. Caste membership also involves rules about food and food-sharing. What kinds of food may or may not be eaten is prescribed and who one may share food with is also specified.

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Caste in the Past

Caste involves a system consisting of many castes arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status. Castes also involve sub-divisions within themselves, i.e., castes almost always have sub-castes and sometimes sub-castes may also have subsub-castes.

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Caste in the Past

Castes were traditionally linked to occupations. A person born into a caste could only practice the occupation associated with that caste, so that occupations were hereditary, i.e. passed on from generation to generation.

Theoretically, the caste system can be understood as the combination of two sets of principles, one based on difference and separation and the other on wholism and hierarchy.

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Caste in the Past

Many of the scriptural rules of caste are thus designed to prevent the mixing of castes - rules ranging from marriage, food sharing and social interaction to occupation,

The hierarchical ordering of castes is based on the distinction between 'purity' and 'pollution'.

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Caste in the Past

This is a division between something believed to be closer to the sacred (thus connoting ritual purity) and something believed to be distant from or opposed to the sacred, therefore considered ritually polluting.

Castes that are considered ritually pure have high status, while those considered less pure or impure have low status.

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Colonialism and Caste

The present form of caste as a social institution has been shaped very strongly by both the colonial period as well as the rapid changes that have come about in independent India.

Initially, the British administrators began by trying to understand the complexities of caste in an effort to learn how to govern the country efficiently.

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Colonialism and Caste

Some of these efforts took the shape of very methodical and intensive surveys and reports on the 'customs and manners' of various tribes and castes all over the country.

The most important official effort to collect information on caste was through the census,

The land revenue settlements and related arrangements and laws served to give legal recognition to the customary (caste-based) rights of the upper castes.

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Colonialism and Caste

These castes now became land owners in the modern sense rather than feudal classes with claims on the produce of the land, or claims to revenue or tribute of various kinds.

At the other end of the scale, towards the end of the colonial period, the administration also took an interest in the welfare of downtrodden castes, referred to as the 'depressed classes' at that time.

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Colonialism and Caste

It was as part of these efforts that the Government of India Act of 1935 was passed which gave legal recognition to the lists or 'schedules' of castes and tribes marked out for special treatment by the state.

This is how the terms 'Scheduled Tribes' and the 'Scheduled Castes' came into being. Castes at the bottom of the hierarchy that suffered severe discrimination, including all the so-called 'untouchable' castes, were included among the Scheduled Castes.

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Caste in the Present

Caste considerations had inevitably played a role in the mass mobilisations of the nationalist movement. Efforts to organise the "depressed classes" and particularly the untouchable castes predated the nationalist movement, having begun in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Caste in the Present

This was an initiative taken from both ends of the caste spectrum- by upper caste progressive reformers as well as by members of the lower castes such as Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar in western India, Ayyankali, Sri Narayana Guru, Iyotheedass and Periyar (E.V. Ramaswamy Naickar) in the South.

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Caste in the Present

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar began organising protests against untouchability from the 1920s onwards.

Anti-untouchability programmes became a significant part of the Congress agenda so that, by the time Independence was on the horizon, there was a broad agreement across the spectrum of the nationalist movement to abolish caste distinctions.

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Caste in the Present

Modern industry created all kinds of new jobs for which there were no caste rules.

Urbanisation and the conditions of collective living in the cities made it difficult for the caste-segregated patterns of social interaction to survive.

Recruitment to industrial jobs, whether in the textile mills of Mumbai (then Bombay), the jute mills of Kolkata (then Calcutta), or elsewhere, continued to be organised along caste and kinship-based lines.

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Caste in the Present

The middle men who recruited labour for factories tended to recruit them from their own caste and region so that particular departments or shop floors were often dominated by specific castes.

'Sanskritisation' refers to a process whereby members of a (usually middle or lower) caste attempt to raise their own social status by adopting the ritual, domestic and social practices of a caste (or castes) of higher status.

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Caste in the Present

Sanskritisation usually accompanies or follows a rise in the economic status of the caste attempting it, though it may also occur independently.

'Dominant caste' is a term used to refer to those castes which had a large population and were granted land rights by the partial land reforms effected after Independence.

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Caste in the Present

The intermediate castes became the 'dominant' castes in the country side and played a decisive role in regional politics and the agrarian economy.

Examples of such dominant castes include the Yadavs of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Vokkaligas of Karnataka, the Reddys and Khammas of Andhra Pradesh, the Marathas of Maharashtra, the Jats of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh and the Patidars of Gujarat.

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Changes in the caste system

- Economic educational resources
- Opportunities offered by rapid development
- Public education
- Professional education in science, technology, medicine and management
- Expansion of public sector jobs

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Tribal Communities

'Tribe' is a modern term for communities that are very old, being among the oldest inhabitants of the sub- continent.

Tribes in India have generally been defined in terms of what they were not.

Tribes were communities that did not practice a religion with a written text; did not have a state or political form of the normal kind; did not have sharp class divisions; and, most important, they did not have caste and were neither Hindus nor peasants.

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Classification of Tribes

In terms of positive characteristics, tribes have been classified according to their 'permanent' and 'acquired' traits.

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Permanent traits

About 85% of the tribal population lives in 'middle India', a wide band stretching from Gujarat and Rajasthan in the west to West Bengal and Odisha in the east, with Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and parts of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh forming the heart of this region.

Of the remaining 15%, over 11% is in the North Eastern states, leaving only a little over 3% living in the rest of India.

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Permanent traits

North Eastern states have the highest concentrations, with all states, except Assam, having concentrations of more than 30%, and some, like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland with more than 60% and upto 95% of tribal population.

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Permanent traits

The ecological habitats covered includes hills, forests, rural plains and urban industrial areas. In terms of language, tribes are categorised into four categories.

Two of them, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, are shared by the rest of the Indian population as well, and tribes account for only about 1% of the former and about 3% of the latter.

The other two language groups, the Austric and Tibeto-Burman, are primarily spoken by tribals, who account for all of the first and over 80% of the second group.

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Permanent traits

In physical-racial terms, tribes are classified under the Negrito, Australoid, Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryan categories.

The biggest tribes are the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, Oraons, Minas, Bodos and Mundas, all of whom are at least a million strong.

The total population of tribes amounts to about 8.2% of the population of India, or about 84 million persons according to the 2001 Census.

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Acquired traits

Classifications based on acquired traits use two main criteria-mode of livelihood, and extent of incorporation into Hindu society - or a combination of the two.

On the basis of livelihood, tribes can be categorised into fishermen, food gatherers and hunters, shifting cultivators, peasants and plantation and industrial workers.

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Acquired traits

From the tribes' point of view, apart from the extent of assimilation, attitude towards Hindu society is also a major criterion, with differentiation between tribes that are positively inclined towards Hinduism and those who resist or oppose it.

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Tribal Identity

Tribal identities are formed by interactional process rather than any primordial (original, ancient) characteristics peculiar to tribes.

The positive impact of successes such as the achievement of statehood for Jharkhand and Chattisgarh after a long struggle - is moderated by continuing problems,

Many of the states of the North-East, for example, have been living for decades under special laws that limit the civil liberties of citizens.

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Tribal Identity

Thus, citizens of states like Manipur or Nagaland don't have the same rights as other citizens of India because their states have been declared as 'disturbed areas'. Another significant development is the gradual emergence of an educated middle class among tribal communities.

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Tribal Identity

Two broad sets of issues have been most important in giving rise to tribal movements. These are issues relating to control over vital economic resources like land and specially forests, and issues relating to matters of ethnic-cultural identity. The two can often go together, but with differentiation of tribal society they may also diverge.

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Family and Kinship

The structure of the family can be studied both as a social institution in itself and also in its relationship to other social institutions of society.

In itself a family can be defined as nuclear or extended. It can be male-headed or female-headed. The line of descent can be matrilineal or patrilineal. The migration of men from the villages of the Himalayan region can lead to an unusual proportion of women-headed families in the village.

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Family and Kinship

Or the work schedules of young parents in the software industry in India may lead to increasing number of grandparents moving in as care-givers to young grandchildren,

It is evident from the kind of changes that take place that not only have family structures changed, but cultural ideas, norms and values also change. These changes are however not so easy to bring about.

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Nuclear and Extended Family

A nuclear family consists of only one set of parents and their children.

An extended family (commonly known as the 'joint family') can take different forms, but has more than one couple, and often more than two generations, living together.

This could be a set of brothers with their individual families, or an elderly couple with their sons and grandsons and their respective families, The extended family often is seen as symptomatic of India.

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Diverse Forms of Family

With regard to the rule of residence, some societies are matrilineal in their marriage and family customs while others are patrilineal.

In matrilineal, the newly married couple stays with the woman's parents, whereas in the second case the couple lives with the man's parents.

With regard to the rules of inheritance, matrilineal societies pass on property from mother to daughter while patrilineal societies do so from father to son.

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Diverse Forms of Family

A patriarchal family structure exists where the men exercise authority and dominance, and matriarchy where the women play a similarly dominant role. However, matriarchy, unlike patriarchy has been a theoretical rather than an empirical concept.

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Diverse Forms of Family

There is no historical or anthropological evidence of matriarchy i.e., societies where women exercise dominance, However, there do exist matrilineal societies, i.e., societies where women inherit property from their mothers but do not exercise control over it, nor are they the decision makers in public affairs.

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