HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN INDIA

Contents

Chapter 1: India and the Caste System

The problem of castes The word caste derives from a Portuguese term introduced in the 16th century to describe the social structure they thought they saw in India. (Spaniards also applied the term to kinship groups they found in the Americas.) The word denotes a rigid, endogamous social group with hereditary transmission and membership, defining both permitted occupations and range of social interactions. The challenge, in dealing with the history of social structure in premodern India, is that the term is often used in an unduly simplistic fashion, making the Indian social system seem more inflexible than it actually was. Many impressions of the caste system were based on observations by Muslims and then Europeans, who did not understand the complexity of actual structures. At the same time, there is no question that, from the classical period onward, Indian society was defined in part by inherited categories, that differed from systems of inequality in other classical societies. There is also no question that religion, and particularly the religion that ultimately developed into Hinduism, played an unusually great role in shaping and legitimizing Indian social stratification. Interestingly, while Indian governments were affected by the caste system, particularly in terms of bureaucratic recruitment, they had little to do with its initial development – in contrast to the situation in China.

Varnas Early religious epics into the 4th century BCE suggest a society divided into four groups, or *varnas*, with the Brahmans, or priests, as the top group. Most current interpretations stress that the schema was probably designed to elevate the priests over other social groups, notably the warriors, who were put in second place. (The high place of priests in traditional Indian social structure is obviously a distinctive feature, quite apart from the caste system, compared to classical China or the Mediterranean where military and government service, as well as land ownership, featured more strongly.) But, again according to most recent scholarship, the varnas at this point were not rigid castes, with a lowest group held out as morally and ritually impure. However, many epics do paint the Brahmans as dedicated to truth, austerity and pure conduct, whereas groups such as the warriors were more appropriate for people prone to anger and capable of physical courage. (The second caste, *Kshatriya,* would also be the source of government officials.) Peasants and artisans were seen as a third group (initially also including merchants), while the last group, the Shudras, were dedicated to service. None of this necessarily describes actual social entities, which were based more on kinship ties, but rather offered a theoretical picture of social organization. The main point is that this literary and religious seedbed of what is now called the caste system suggests a great deal of tentativeness and flexibility. But it is widely agreed that this very general, fourfold division of society continued to describe much Indian social thought and practice from that point onward.

The "untouchables" The idea of a low group, the Shudras, similarly emerged gradually. It may have applied particularly to aboriginal peoples taken over during the in-migration of IndoEuropeans. It may also have applied to groups originally held as slaves. Ultimately --- though the timing is not clear – the lowest castes were associated with morally tainted (though useful) occupations such as leather work and handling dead bodies, and were regarded as impure, barred from social contact with higher groups (though they were for the most part not literally slaves, in the sense of being owned by others). Complicating all this still further is that fact that the nascent caste system varied greatly from one region of India to another, and among the different major religious (including Jainism, for example, as well as Hinduism), and many Indians were not clearly described by a caste system at all, with sons for example frequently choosing occupations that differed from those of their fathers.

Mauryan and Gupta empires By the time of the Mauryan empire (321-185 BCE), what is now called the caste system was apparently becoming more rigid, though particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent. It especially described acceptable marriage boundaries, with choices rigidly confined to one's own caste; and caste membership increasingly became based on inheritance – hence the notion that while one could fall out of a caste by inappropriate behavior, one could not rise into a higher one. Hindu belief began to solidify this notion by arguing that appropriate performance of caste duties was a matter of religious as well as social obligation, that would be rewarded by advancement in the next life, through reincarnation, either into a higher caste or ultimately into a higher spiritual plane altogether. Caste and religion in this sense became increasingly intertwined – at least in some Hindu regions. Further, primary loyalties tended to prioritize social groups, including castes, over devotion to the state; in many region, villages, organized by caste, defined and regulated caste functions. Women at this point were seen in terms of inherited caste, though inferior to men within each group. The later Gupta empire saw the beginnings of a proliferation of castes, building out from the original four. In some regions, for example, a specific merchant caste was identified (with fairly high status).

Jati *Jati* constituted groups within caste, probably originally based on kinship, clustered around specific occupations. Jati may have originated early on, though references in the early epics were sparse; but their importance and complexity undoubtedly increased over time. Smaller than castes, jati provided considerable flexibility; their number and definition changed according to economic need. In the cities, jati were often associated the artisanal trades. Most marriages occurred, not only within the caste but within the jati; however, because definitions of jati evolved, some social mobility was possible. Further, even castes themselves did not described fixed economic positions: members of the Brahman caste, for example, might vary greatly in wealth, with impoverished families nevertheless clinging proudly to their high status. The caste system proved compatible with considerable flexibility, and many people undoubtedly concentrated more on their occupational group and individual opportunities than on the more abstract social categories.

Evolution After the classical period the caste and jati system tended to spread southward, to other parts of the subcontinent, though there was always great regional variation in the precise definitions and numbers of the social groups. The sheer number of both groups expanded. Neither Buddhist nor Muslim minorities fully accepted the caste system, though at the village level there was considerable overlap. There is no question that the Mughal empire, launched early in the 16th century under Muslim rulers, solidified the caste system in extending control over rural areas. Regional Mughal administrators were chosen from the higher castes (mainly the top two), and were responsible for control over the peasantry including taxation. At the same time, majority Hindu groups also emphasized caste loyalties to protect Hindu culture despite Muslim rule at the top. Then the British, particularly by the 19th and early 20th century, gave further impetus to the caste system. They identified the Brahmans as their main contact points, using members of this caste as subordinate administrators and providing opportunities for a more Western education that were not extended to other groups. They also codified lists of caste and jati in documents such as the "scheduled Castes" in the 1935 Government of India Act. Many current critics of British rule make much of this intensification, which unquestionably complicates interpretations of the caste system before Mughal and British rule. At the same time British courts did not fully accept the caste system, for example refusing to adjust punishments to caste position; the railway system that developed from the 1850s onward did not enforce caste distinctions. Further, gradual economic changes in the British period, including some factory development, further complicated the system.

Study questions

1. What is a caste? What are some of the key complexities in dealing with the history of India's caste system?
2. In what ways did the caste system allow some social mobility?
3. What was the relationship between the caste system and Hinduism?
4. How did the caste system change under the Mughals and the British?

Further reading

Tim Dyson, *A Population History of India, from the first modern people to the present day* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications* (revised ed., University of Chicago Press, 1963

Chapter 2: India after Independence

Overview The big, distinctive issue in the recent history of India's social structure is obviously the heritage of the caste system. Legally banned since independence in 1947, based on the belief by nationalist leaders that the tradition was incompatible with a modern, democratic state, and subject to a host of remedial measures, the lingering attachment to caste identity has remained a vital feature – often compared to the intractability of racial divisions in places like the United States. Caste has however changed significantly – for example with an interesting increase in the rate of inter-caste marriage. Too much attention to the changes and continuity in caste should not however obscure other features of the social structure. Stratification is profoundly affected by the continued numerical dominance of the rural population – still 65% of the total in 2021, though this is markedly down from the 83% figure of 1950. The expansion of education and its role in providing opportunities for social mobility similarly reflects the rural urban divide, with significant gains falling well short of universal access even at the primary level. Overall, the attacks on the caste system plus changes associated with considerable industrialization provide a distinctive version of the combination of new ideas and new economic forces characteristic of many key societies at some point during the past two centuries.

Dealing with caste: legal and policy changes Article 15 of India's constitution prohibited discrimination based on caste and Article 17 declared the practice of Untouchability illegal. At various points from 1956 onward the government has conducted inquiries into discrimination, setting up a National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to investigate the progress of the "lower" castes. It has provided economic and other incentives for intermarriage among people of different castes and for university admission for the lower castes. Two major castes categories have received primary attention: the Scheduled Castes (sometimes called Dalit) and the Other Backward Class, including castes above the historical Untouchables but presumably suffering economic and educational disadvantages. (It is estimated that about 16% of India's population belongs to the Dalit group, while about 43% are in the Other Backward Class. Another 9% belong to listed Tribes.) These figures are however sometimes disputed, amid assertions that the intermediate and lower groups are not as large as claimed.) This list has been periodically revised, depending on various criteria, with some castes removed from the list because of progress, but others added. A certain number of government posts are reserved for the lower caste categories. In the 1990s for example 27% of all posts in government-owned enterprises and agencies were reserved for the Other Backward Class, along with 22% for the lowest groups. The efforts to undo the effects of caste have commanded considerable attention and resources. Some critics contend, however, that they actually help perpetuate caste identity, because they provide incentives for demonstrating membership in one of the lower castes (while also potentially creating resentments and assertions of identity in other caste groups). At the same time, leaders in some of the lower groups, particularly the Dalits, have been active in attempting to boost achievement and group esteem. And it is important to note that several of India's top politicians, including Prime Minister Nardendra Modi, have come from levels below the top castes.

Rates of change Caste identities have remained extremely important. This applies obviously to the pride and identity claimed by people of historically higher caste origin, but also to many in the lower group who continue to find caste position natural and who see caste not only as a source of identity but in terms of active mutual assistance. Caste identities and discrimination have even extended to groups of Indians who have emigrated elsewhere; a 2020 case in California thus alleged discrimination against an engineer from a historically lower caste, and issues have also arisen in the United Kingdom. In India itself, change has occurred, but with limitations. Thus despite the reserved posts, people of lower caste origin are overrepresented in the lowest category of government jobs (there are four major categories), but underrepresented in the two top groups. Only 6.1% of all marriages currently involve people from different castes, meaning that for most people caste continues to define boundaries of acceptable social interaction. Violence against people from lower castes remains a problem and according to some

indications has increased during the past decade as Hindu Nationalism has gained ground in politics; and convictions for crimes in this category are low. This said, despite the low rates, inter-caste marriages doubled between 1981 and 2005 (almost exclusively in urban India), while the percentage of lowest caste people in the highest paying, most senior jobs in India (public and private sectors combined) increased tenfold, from 1% of all such jobs in 1959 to 10% in 1995. Literacy and health rates for people of lower caste origin have improved steadily, while remaining below overall national averages; the poverty level of these groups dropped from 48% in 1995 to 39% a decade later (compared to the national rates of 35% and 27% respectively). Some authorities now argue that poverty is a much more important variable than caste origin in the actual impact of stratification on Indian life.

Other changes in social stratification: rural As in other societies such as Latin America, India's rural population has been deeply affected, and divided, by changes in the agricultural economy. Large numbers of peasants get by on very small plots of land, while other proprietors have taken fuller advantage of expanding markets for food. India's fabled "green revolution", introducing new methods and crops that have heightened production and reduced food shortages, disproportionately benefited peasants and other owners with more substantial holdings in land, creating new social and regional divisions in the countryside.

Other changes: urban Urban growth obviously expanded the working class, while new educational levels – including very high production of people with doctoral degrees – and white-collar job opportunities greatly enlarged the urban middle class, estimated in 2019 to contain almost 100 million people, or about 5% of the total population (this is up from 30 million and 1% of the total as recently as 1990, a product of rapid recent economic growth). (A substantial segment of the lower end of this class work in service sector jobs, providing customer relations via telephone and computer for insurance companies and other businesses in the United States and Britain, taking advantage of English language capacity.) As in China, the middle class is increasingly defined by consumer life style and income levels, though major acquisitions are far less common and the class as a whole is noticeably smaller than its Chinese counterpart. Economic setbacks from the 2020-21 pandemic may have reduced the size of this class considerably, at least for the time being.

Study questions

1. Why has caste identity remained important in India's social structure?
2. What have been the main changes in the role of caste in India's social structure?
3. What are the characteristics of India's urban middle class?

Further reading

Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: the rise of the lower castes* (C. Hurst, 2003)

Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: changing patterns of stratification in a Tangore village* (University of California Press, 1965)

Dipankar Gupta, *Caste in Question: identity or hierarchy?* (Sage, 2004)