

1. Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 03 (Class XII, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Social Institution – Part 1
Module Id	lesy_10301
Pre-requisites	Sociology, concepts, social institutions, social change
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caste : As a social institution• Features of caste system• Cast in different time period
Keywords	Indian society, Social change, Social institutions, Caste, Tribes, Processes of social change

2. Development Team

Role	Name	Affiliation
National MOOC Coordinator (NMC)	Prof. Amarendra P. Behera	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Program Coordinator	Dr. Mohd. Mamur Ali	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Course Coordinator (CC) / PI	Dr. Sheetal Sharma	Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Subject Matter Expert (SME)	Dr. Sheetal Sharma	Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Review Team	Ms. Abha Seth	DAV Public School, Sec B-1, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi

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In the first chapter we discussed about the structure and dynamics of the population of India in this Chapter we will take up the study of social institutions. As you are aware that sociology is academic study of social behavior, society and social institutions. A population is not just a collection of separate, unrelated individuals, it is a society made up of distinct but interlinked classes and communities of various kinds. These communities are sustained and regulated by social institutions and social relationships. In this chapter we will be looking at three institutions that are central to Indian society, namely caste, tribe and family.

1. Caste and the caste system

The concept of caste is not new to us. We are familiar with this term and come across the concept of caste in many ways. We hear about caste being an important institution shaping social, economic, and political institutions in India. Like any Indian, you already know that 'caste' is the name of an ancient social institution that has been part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years. But like any Indian living in the twenty-first century, you also know that something called 'caste' is definitely a part of Indian society today. To what extent are these two 'castes' – the one that is supposed to be part of India's past, and the one that is part of its present – the same thing? This is the question that we will try to answer in this section.

Caste In The Past

Caste is a form of social stratification. It categorises people on the basis of occupations. Caste is an institution uniquely associated with the Indian sub-continent. While similar social arrangements with similar effects have existed in other parts of the world, the exact form has not been found elsewhere. Although it is an institution characteristic of Hindu society, caste has spread to the major non-Hindu communities of the Indian sub-continent, specially among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

The word 'caste' originates from the Portuguese word *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*, though this 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. *Jati* is the word most commonly used to refer to the institution of caste in Indian languages, though it is interesting to note that, increasingly, Indian language speakers are beginning to use the English word ‘caste’.

The relationship between *varna* and *jati* has been the subject of much speculation and debate among scholars. The most common interpretation is to treat *varna* as a broad all-India aggregative classification, while *jati* is taken to be a regional or local sub-classification involving a much more complex system consisting of hundreds or even thousands of castes and sub-castes.

This means that while the four *varna* classification is common to all of India, the *jati* hierarchy has more local classifications that vary from region to region.

There are diverse opinion on the issue that how old is caste system. It is generally agreed, though, that the four *varna* classification is roughly three thousand years old. However, the ‘caste system’ stood for different things in different time periods, so that it is misleading to think of the same system continuing for three thousand years. In its earliest phase, in the late Vedic period roughly between 900 — 500 BC, the caste system was really a *varna* system and consisted of only four major divisions. These divisions were not very elaborate or very rigid, and they were not determined by birth. Movement across the categories seems to have been not only possible but quite common. It is only in the post- Vedic period that caste became the rigid institution that is familiar to us from well known definitions.

The most significant defining features of caste are the following:

1. Ascribed: Caste is determined by birth – a child is “born into” the caste of its parents. Caste is never a matter of choice. 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.
2. Endogamy: Membership in a caste involves strict rules about marriage. Caste groups are “endogamous”, i.e. marriage is restricted to members of the group.

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3. Social interactions: 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.
 4. Hierarchy: Caste involves a system consisting of many castes arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status. In theory, every person has a caste, and every caste has a specified place in the hierarchy of all castes. While the hierarchical position of many castes, particularly in the middle ranks, may vary from region to region, there is always a hierarchy.
 5. Castes also involve sub-divisions within themselves, i.e., castes almost always have sub-castes and sometimes sub-castes may also have sub- sub-castes. This is referred to as a segmental organisation.
 6. Occupational division: 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. On the other hand, a particular occupation could only be pursued by the caste associated with it – members of other castes could not enter the occupation.

These features are the prescribed rules found in ancient scriptural texts. Since these prescriptions were not always practiced, we cannot say to what extent these rules actually determined the empirical reality of caste – its concrete meaning for the people living at that time. As you can see, most of the prescriptions involved prohibitions or restrictions of various sorts. It is also clear from the historical evidence that caste was a very unequal institution – some castes benefitted greatly from the system, while others were condemned to a life of endless labour and subordination. Most important, once caste became rigidly determined by birth, it was in principle impossible for a person to ever change their life circumstances. Whether they deserved it or not, an upper caste person would always have high status, while a lower caste person would always be of low status.

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**. Each caste is supposed to be different from – and is therefore strictly separated from – every other caste. 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. On the other hand, these different and separated castes do not have an individual

existence – they can only exist in relation to a larger whole, the totality of society consisting of all castes. Further, this societal whole or system is a hierarchical rather than egalitarian system. Each individual caste occupies not just a distinct place, but also an ordered rank – a particular position in a ladder-like arrangement going from highest to lowest.

The hierarchical ordering of castes is based on the distinction between ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’. 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. As in all societies, material power (i.e., economic or military power) is closely associated with social status, so that those in power tend to be of high status, and vice versa. Historians believe that those who were defeated in wars were often assigned low caste status.

Finally, castes are not only unequal to each other in ritual terms, they are also supposed to be complementary and non-competing groups. In other words,

each caste has its own place in the system which cannot be taken by any other caste. Since caste is also linked with occupation, the system functions as the social division of labour, except that, in principle, it allows no mobility.

Not surprisingly, our sources of knowledge about the past and specially the ancient past are inadequate. It is difficult to be very certain about what things were like at that time, or the reasons why some institutions and practices came to be established. But even if we knew all this, it still cannot tell us about what should be done today. Just because something happened in the past or is part of our tradition, it is not necessarily right or wrong forever. Every age has to think afresh about such questions and come to its own collective decision about its social institutions.

Colonialism and caste

Not much is known about the caste system in ancient times but we know a lot more about caste in our recent history. If modern history is taken to begin with the nineteenth century, then Indian Independence in 1947 offers a natural dividing line between the colonial period (roughly 150 years from around 1800 to 1947) and the post-Independence or post-colonial period (the more than seven decades from 1947 to the present day). 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, such as urbanization, migration and modernization, that have come about in independent India.

Scholars have agreed that all major social institutions and specially **the institution of caste underwent major changes during the colonial period**. In fact, some scholars argue that what we know today as caste is more a product of colonialism than of ancient Indian tradition. Initially, the British administrators began by trying to understand the complexities of caste in an effort to learn how to govern the country efficiently. 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. Many British administrative officials were also amateur ethnologists and took great interest in pursuing such surveys and studies.

But by far the most important official effort to collect information on caste was through the census. First begun in the 1860s, the census became a regular ten-yearly exercise conducted by the British Indian government from 1881 onwards. The 1901 Census under the direction of Herbert Risley was particularly important as it sought to collect information on the social hierarchy of caste – i.e., the social order of precedence in particular regions, as to the position of each caste in the rank order. This effort had a huge impact on social perceptions of caste and hundreds of petitions were addressed to the Census Commissioner by representatives of different castes claiming a higher position in the social scale and offering historical and scriptural evidence for their claims. Overall, scholars feel that this kind of direct attempt to count caste and to officially record caste status changed the very nature of the institution. Before this kind of intervention, caste identities had been much more fluid and less rigid; once they began to be counted and recorded, caste began to take on a new shape/life.

Other efforts and interventions by the British also had an impact on the institution of caste. The land revenue settlements and related arrangements and laws served to give legal recognition to the customary (caste-based) rights of the upper castes. 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. Large scale irrigation schemes like the ones in the Punjab were accompanied by efforts to settle populations there, and these also had a caste dimension. 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. 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.

One can say that colonialism brought about significant changes in the institution of caste. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that the institution of caste underwent fundamental changes during the colonial period. In fact it was not only India, but the entire world was undergoing rapid change during this period due to the spread of capitalism and modernity.

Caste During Colonial Period

Indian Independence in 1947 marked a big, but ultimately only partial break with the colonial past. 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. 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, Iyothedass and Periyar (E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker) in the South. 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. The dominant view in the nationalist movement was to treat caste as a social evil and as a colonial ploy to divide Indians. But the nationalist leaders, above all, Mahatma Gandhi, were able to simultaneously work for the upliftment of the lower castes, advocate the abolition of untouchability and other caste restrictions, and, at the same time, reassure the landowning upper castes that their interests, too, would be looked after.

Caste in the past – independent india

The government after Independence inherited and reflected these contradictions. On the one hand, the state was committed to the abolition of caste and explicitly wrote this into the Constitution. On the other hand, the state was both unable and unwilling to push

through radical reforms which would have undermined the economic basis for caste inequality. At yet another level, the state assumed that if it operated in a caste-blind manner, this would automatically lead to the undermining of caste based privileges and the eventual abolition of the institution. For example, appointments to government jobs took no account of caste, thus leaving the well-educated upper castes and the ill-educated or often illiterate lower castes to compete on “equal” terms. The only exception to this was in the form of reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In other words, in the decades immediately after Independence, the state did not make sufficient effort to deal with the fact that the upper castes and the lower castes were far from equal in economic and educational terms.

Caste In The Present

One of the positive effects of modernity is break down of caste system. 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. The development activity of the state and the growth of private industry also affected caste indirectly through the speeding up and intensification of economic change. At a different level, modern educated Indians attracted to the liberal ideas of individualism and meritocracy, began to abandon the more extreme caste practices. On the other hand, it was remarkable how resilient caste proved to be. 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. 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. Prejudice against the untouchables remained quite strong and was not absent from the city, though not as extreme as it could be in the village.

However despite these changes caste system continues to exist and determines many of our actions and decisions. In the cultural and domestic spheres that caste has proved strongest. Endogamy, or the practice of marrying within the caste, remained largely unaffected by modernisation and change. Even today, most marriages take place within caste boundaries, although there are more intercaste marriages. While some boundaries may have become more flexible or porous, the borders between groups of castes of similar socio-economic status are still heavily patrolled. For example, inter-caste marriages within the upper castes (eg., brahmin, bania, rajput) may be more likely now than before; but marriages between an upper

caste and backward or scheduled caste person remain rare even today. Something similar may have occurred with regard to rules of food sharing.

Caste and politics

It is interesting to note that caste has played a very important role in politics. From its very beginnings in independent India, democratic politics has been deeply conditioned by caste. While its functioning has become more and more complex and hard to predict, it cannot be denied that caste remains central to electoral politics. Since the 1980s we have also seen the emergence of explicitly caste-based political parties. In the early general elections, it seemed as though caste solidarities were decisive in winning elections. But the situation soon got very complicated as parties competed with each other in utilising the same kind of caste calculus.

Sanskritisation

Nothing can remain static in this world. All the institutions undergo change, either slowly or rapidly. Caste has also changed and the institution of caste as well. Sociologists and social anthropologists coined many new concepts to try and understand these processes of change. One of the most significant explanation of changes in the caste system is made by M.N. Srinivas. This is the idea of 'sanskritisation' and 'dominant caste'. Let us understand what is meant by both these concepts.

'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.

M.N. Srinivas characterized sanskritisation as a procedure by which "a low or center Hindu position, or tribal or other groups, changes its traditions, custom belief system, and lifestyle toward a high and regularly twice-born castes. By and large such changes are trailed by a case to a higher position in the standing progression than that generally yielded to the petitioner class by the nearby group"

Although this phenomenon is an old one and predates Independence and perhaps even the colonial period, it has intensified in recent times. The patterns for emulation chosen most often were the brahmin or kshatriya castes; practices included adopting vegetarianism, wearing of sacred thread, performance of specific prayers and religious ceremonies, and so on. One clear case of sanskritisation is the selection, in imitating of the act of twice-born castes, of

vegetarianism by individuals having a place with the purported "low ranks" who are generally are non-vegetarians.

Sanskritisation usually accompanies or follows a rise in the economic status of the caste attempting it, though it may also occur independently. Later, it was also argued that sanskritisation may be a defiant claiming of previously prohibited ritual/social privileges (such as the wearing of the sacred thread, which used to invite severe punishment) rather than a flattering imitation of the 'upper' castes by the 'lower' castes.

Dominant caste:

'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 initiated after Independence. Dominant caste is defined on the basis of its numerical preponderance, i.e. those who are largest in number. Obviously their number gives them social, political and economic strength over other caste communities. The land reforms took away rights from the erstwhile claimants, the upper castes who were 'absentee landlords' in the sense that they played no part in the agricultural economy other than claiming their rent. They frequently did not live in the village either, but were based in towns and cities. These land rights now came to be vested in the next layer of claimants, those who were involved in the management of agriculture but were not themselves the cultivators. These intermediate castes in turn depended on the labour of the lower castes including specially the 'untouchable' castes for tilling and tending the land. However, once they got land rights, they acquired considerable economic power. Their large numbers also gave them political power in the era of electoral democracy based on universal adult franchise. Thus, these 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.

Caste – Visible And Invisible In The Contemporary Period

One of the most significant yet paradoxical changes in the caste system in the contemporary period is that it has tended to become 'invisible' for the upper caste, urban middle and upper classes. For these groups, who have benefited the most from the developmental policies of the

post-colonial era, caste has appeared to decline in significance precisely because it has done its job so well. Their caste status had been crucial in ensuring that these groups had the necessary economic and educational resources to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by rapid development. In particular, the upper caste elite were able to benefit from subsidised public education, specially professional education in science, technology, medicine and management. At the same time, they were also able to take advantage of the expansion of state sector jobs in the early decades after Independence. In this initial period, their lead over the rest of society (in terms of education) ensured that they did not face any serious competition. As their privileged status got consolidated in the second and third generations, these groups began to believe that their advancement had little to do with caste. Certainly for the third generations from these groups their economic and educational capital alone is quite sufficient to ensure that they will continue to get the best in terms of life chances. For this group, it now seems that caste plays no part in their public lives, being limited to the personal sphere of religious practice or marriage and kinship. However, a further complication is introduced by the fact that this is a differentiated group. Although the privileged as a group are overwhelmingly upper caste, not all upper caste people are privileged, some being poor.

For the so called scheduled castes and tribes and the backward castes – the opposite has happened. For them, caste has become all too visible, indeed their caste has tended to eclipse the other dimensions of their identities. Because they have no inherited educational and social capital, and because they must compete with an already entrenched upper caste group, they cannot afford to abandon their caste identity for it is one of the few collective assets they have. Moreover, they continue to suffer from discrimination of various kinds. The policies of reservation and other forms of protective discrimination instituted by the state in response to political pressure serve as their lifelines. But using this lifeline tends to make their caste the all-important and often the only aspect of their identity that the world recognises.

The juxtaposition of these two groups – a seemingly caste-less upper caste group and an apparently caste-defined lower caste group – is one of the central aspects of the institution of caste in the present.