

Social Stratification in India

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Abstract - *Social stratification in India is very complex concepts. It includes the concepts of caste, class, race and ethnicity. What is the nature of castes in India? What is the nature of class? How are both interrelated? Is class changing into caste? This article discusses some of these issues.*

Keywords: *Caste, Class, Social Stratification*].

Social stratification is the process in which the society has been divided into many layers. It can be compared to a number of layers beneath the ground. The top-most layers are rigid and as we move down the layers become more softer. Today, in India social stratification is not only because of castes but also class.

The division of varnas into four divisions namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra is one type of social stratification. But this is a very simple and holistic organization. In reality there are many castes, sub-castes, and sub-sub-castes within these divisions. And as we go deeper the structural distance between the castes keeps getting closer and closer.

Another type of stratification which is found in the cities is that of Classes. We find lower class- which falls below the poverty line. Then there is the middle class which comprises of the significant part of the society and is a major pillar of society. The middle class is made up of three parts- the lower middle class, the middle class and the upper middle class. And ultimately we have the elites who are the elites of the society. According to Marx they may be called the bourgeoisie or the capitalists who control the forces of market and power in the political institutions.

M.N. Srinivas was a popular social anthropologist of India who developed the concept of 'Sanskritization' during his fieldwork. According to his view the caste system in India is not as rigid as has been pointed out by Dumont according to his principle of hierarchy. Cultural mobility exists between the castes and it is an open structure. According to Srinivas sanskritization is a process by which the lower castes move from impurity to purity by imitating the higher echelons, their life-styles and ideology of the twice born so that they can become like them through cultural mobility.

Thus, we can see that in India the layers of castes are not confined to occupational division of labour that the Brahmins should be in teaching profession, Kshatriyas should be defence personell, Vaishyas should be in trading field and Shudras should be in the menial service sector. This breaks the stereotype of what a casual holistic eye sees. This was a reality during the days of ancient India and when Manu wrote the manusmriti but as India sanskritised itself people changed for the better. The panorama of castes has changed greatly in India today.

The constitution was drafted in 1950 and the lower castes and other backward castes were given special provisions. To help them to increase their status in society the government started giving reservations. It has been observed that the lower middle class which mostly forms the general category was very hurt when the Mandal Commission was started. Most of them committed suicides. They burned themselves in public view and were mostly students mostly college going and unemployed. The Mandal commission had given special provisions for the classes which fell below poverty line. But the class which felt that it was exploited the most was the lower middle class whose structural distance was right above the down trodden classes.

Prior to Westernisation, when India was primarily rural classes existed but in a very rudimentary form. There were the Jamindars who owned wealth, land and property and their were the bonded labourers and the peasants who worked under them. As westernization started with the contact of the Britishers the rate of urbanization and industrialization also increased. People started migrating from villages to cities and the concept of class started to emerge. A component of rationality was imposed. Actually westernization accelerated the pace of sanskritization. As communication and transportation increased it was not convenient to stay pure all the time. A Brahmin could not have a bath at every successive train station. At one point he had to get rid of the concept of untouchability. Cities brought with them a new culture altogether. Fashion changed as Brahmins wore coat and pant instead of kurta and dhoti. They ate in dining room wearing shoes. They started taking onion, radish and carrots as salad. It all depended on how much wealth a person owned and therefore constituted a class.

Today the fight to be in a class has become competitive. To gain any job in the government sector exams and interviews are conducted. Categories like general, OBC, SC, and ST are there. These exams test the candidate's ability to stand in stratification system of merit. He needs to achieve his place to climb the stratification ladder. Today he can achieve not only by having high marks, but good personality and communication skills. In the cities from a community man he has become an organizational man. A man of high class has high status, high level of income, high prestige and a strong personality. A lower class man is deprived of all these things. The probability that he can reach his counterpart's position depends on many factors. Some of which are choice of school, choice of job, choice of college, aptitude, family's position in society, inspirational teachers, healthy work environment, healthy living conditions etc. It cannot be presumed that the high class individual achieved every thing because every thing was perfect for him. But most of the supportive factors might have motivated him to climb the status ladder.

The other reason why castes are still active in India is because of reservations. The government has provided SCs, STs and OBCs special advantages so that they rise in their social status. A convenient example would be getting reservations during promotions. According to M.N.Srinivas reservations are there because the political parties in India want to maintain their 'vote-banks'. Although, the creamy layer has been avoided but still in some states of India reservation in up to 50% for the deprived classes. If this continues their will be a separate quota for every caste and separatism will encouraged and the unity in diversity of India will be questioned. The very reason why the Mandal report was controversial was because it based its facts on the 1931 census when most of the castes were based on occupations. Since then a lot has changed; people have migrated, they have changed their professions, they have been sankritized, westernized, modernized, and now are even becoming globalised. The prominent subaltern public figure Dr. B. R. Ambedkar declared that there should be no reservations and every one should be on an equal footing. The governments reason that it is trying to calm the tensions between the castes and lift India from poverty does no hold as much weight in today's circumstances when so much has changed. Even if Rajputs of Bihar are given reservations as against Rajputs of Gujrat does not mean that the former are the victims of discrimination. They might be economically backward but that does not mean that they deserve reservations. Our policy should be like America where every follows the 'American dream' - to rise socially, economically and psychologically from the poverty of the downtrodden to getting wealthy.

Some sociologists like Sejvik consider that endogamy results in a healthy offspring. This is because interference of outside castes is not there. But this is a controversial matter since there is no way to prove this matter. Thus the fact that endogamy in castes maintains a pure line of genetics cannot be proved and is without any supporting evidence.

Castes are also the basis of socialistic structure since today castes have taken the shape of caste organizations and they have their own club, trade union etc. According to Ghurye the caste system has divided Hindu society into many small parts and there is no integration or community feeling among them. Thus it is a hindrance to economic development.

A major problem with caste system is that the parents of the lower caste are motivated to marry their daughter to a higher caste. The result of this malpractice is that they are demanded dowry which results in exploitation of the bride and is a major evil in Hindu society. The constitution of India has tried to end lower caste untouchability by passing the 'untouchability offences act' which was later refined in 1976 to 'protection of civil rights act'. This was after the Mandal Commission Report when the caste atrocities were on the rise.

What has caused the caste to become class in India is that due to urbanization and industrialization people of different castes started working together in one factory. This failed the occupational division of labour which was present in the castes before. So mass specialization required the cooperation of many castes. Today castes are becoming more open. Many of the caste norms are disappearing and Caste competition and conflict is increasing. In this way castes are taking the shape of class. In the cities numerous Harijans have established trade-unions.

The Castes through Caste organizations in the cities has tried to settle Caste disputes. Those Caste organizations which have plenty of money provide medical care to their members at a very low cost. They also have insurance for accidents and chronic diseases.

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