

- The caste is an institution that characterizes the structure of social stratification.
- It has been viewed both as an institution as well as an ideology.
- Institutionally, "caste" provided a framework for arranging and organizing social groups in terms of their statuses and positions in the social and economic system.
- It fixed individuals into the structure of social hierarchy on the basis of their birth
- As an ideology, caste was a system of values and ideas that legitimized and reinforced the existing structure of social inequality
- It also provided a worldview around which a typical Hindu organized his/her life.
- Apart from being an institution that distinguished India from other societies, caste was also an epitome of the traditional society, a "closed system", where generation after generation individuals did similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of lives.
- In contrast, the modern industrial societies of the West were projected a "open systems" of social stratification, societies based on class, where individuals could choose their occupations according to their abilities and tastes.
- They had social mobility and they could change their class position.
- Such mobility at the individual level was impossible in the caste system

#### FEATURES

- G.S Ghurye, identified six different features of the Hindu caste system
- Segmental division of society : - Castes were groups with well-developed life-styles of their own – determined by birth and not by choice – status depended not on the amount of wealth he possessed but on the rank that his caste enjoyed in the Hindu society.
- Hierarchy : – Each group was given a specific status in the overall framework of hierarchy.
- Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse: – rules as to what sort of food or drink would be accepted by a person and from what caste
- Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections – Segregation of individual castes or groups of castes – was the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities – Certain sacraments could not be performed by any non- Brahmin caste. Similarly, shudras and other lower castes were not allowed to read or learn the sacred scriptures.

- Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation : - Generally each caste considered a particular occupation as its legitimate calling.
- The term "caste" is not of Indian origin. Its origin has been located in the Portuguese word casta, meaning 'race' or 'pure stock'. Also it was outsiders, those who came from the West, who first used the term "caste" to make sense of the social organization of the Indian society.
- It is currently used as a general term that refers to two different systems of social relations, viz. Varna and Jati
- The varna system is a broad framework that applies, more or less, to the entire country
- The varnas are only four in number, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (these is also a fifth category of the "untouchables", who are considered to be outside the varna system and are ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy)
- The Jatis, concrete social groupings of people, differ considerably from region to region
- Each linguistic region has two to three hundred jatis
- Jatis are relatively small endogamous groups with a distinctive style of life and a specific additional occupation.
- Unlike the varna scheme, the mutual position of jatis has been less clear and subject to contestation.
- Many jatis have claimed higher status than assigned to them by others
- This ambiguity has been observed particularly in the middle level caste groupings.
- Sanskritisation : – A lower caste tried to change its position in the caste hierarchy and move upward by adopting the lifestyle of a higher caste. M.N. Srinivas called this process 'Sanskritisation'
- According to Andre Beteille, such a process was accompanied by some real improvement in the material condition of a group
- However, those who Sanskritised their style of life did not question the system of caste hierarchy or its ideology'.
- They merely tried to change their position in the system.
- While individual castes moved up or down, the structure remained the same

#### THE BASE OF HIERARCHY IN THE CASTE

- Different scholars have explained the phenomenon of caste differently.
- While some locate the origin of the caste system in racial wars, other explain it in economic terms.
- Still others have explained it by referring to the specific cultural values of the Indian society.

- They argued that while upper caste Hindus were of "foreign" or Aryan origin, the lower castes belonged to the "native" or "aboriginal" races.
- Being the conquerors, the Aryans assigned themselves the status of upper castes and those who were conquered were made subjects by the dominant Aryans and were given the status of lower castes.
- The fact that members of upper castes had fairer skin than the lower castes was cited as a testimony in support of such a hypothesis.
- However, this theory has been rejected for being purely speculative in nature.
- There is very little hard evidence to support such an argument.
- Further, it has been argued that those from the lower castes had darker skin not because they necessarily belonged to a different racial stock but because they were the ones who did much of the physical work in the fields in the open.
- Moreover, even if it was true that the Aryans came from outside and subjugated the native population, it does not automatically explain the complex reality of caste distinctions and hierarchy.
- Why did such an elaborate scheme of hierarchy was developed? Why did such a scenario did not give rise to class type of inequality?

#### CASTE & OCCUPATION

- Those who look at caste in economic terms generally do so by referring to obvious fact of the relationship between caste and occupation.
- Caste, they argue, was a kind of division of labour, different groups specializing in different occupations.
- Some others see it as a specific form of pre-capitalist/feudal separated from each other in certain respects (caste endogamy, restrictions on eating together and on physical contact). but interdependent in other (traditional division of labour).
- The word 'caste', not only involved hereditary specialization of occupations but also differential rights.
- Different occupations were arranged in a hierarchical order that made their occupants socially unequal.
- Inequality was an essential feature of the caste system.
- Along with inequality, he also underlined the element of pollution as an important feature of caste.
- Different groups in a caste society, tend to 'repel each other rather than attract, each retires within itself isolates itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relation with neighboring groups'.

- Thus Bougle identified three core features of caste system, viz., hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion
- S.V. Ketkar, in his book on the History of Caste in India, published in 1909, had emphasized on the notion of purity and pollution being the chief principle on which the system was based.

#### PURITY & POLLUTION

- French sociologist Louis Dumont offered a detailed account of his theory in his own book, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications.
- Dumont has developed a general theory of the traditional Hindu caste system
- Though he provided ethnographic material in support of his arguments, his main sources were Indological, the classical Hindu texts.
- He approached the Hindu caste system from a structuralist perspective that focused on the underlying structure of ideas of a given system.
- These "essential principles" constitute the logic of a system and may not be apparently visible in its everyday practice.
- Dumont is critical of those who tried to explain caste in terms of politico-economic factors where caste was seen as a system of domination and exploitation.
- He criticizes F.G. Bailey, who in his book on 'Caste and the Economic Frontier' (based on his field work in Orissa), has argued that those who achieve wealth and political power tend to rise in the ritual scheme of ranking.
- In other words – the ranking system of caste groups was validated by differential control over the productive resources of the village
- According to Dumont, they failed to appreciate the peculiarity of the Indian society.
- Dumont argues, that these scholars tended to look for parallels of the Western society in India, viz., class type social organization
- He insists that India and the traditional societies in general were fundamentally different from the Western society.
- Dumont shows how Bailey could not explain as to why the Brahmins were placed at the top of the caste hierarchy.
- Bailey had recognized the fact that the correlation between power and ritual status did not work at the two extremes of the caste ladder

#### MODERN & TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

- He suggests that the Hindu caste system needed to be look-at as a system that was an opposite of the West.
- While the West was a modern society based on individualism, India was a traditional society.
- The social structures of traditional societies functioned on very different principles and could be understood only in "totality".

- It was only through this framework of "totality" or "holism" that a proper theory of caste could be developed.
- Unlike the modern societies of the West, the Indian society was concerned with maintaining social differences and inequalities.
- The ideal of "totality" was more valued in a traditional society than that of the "individual".
- Dumont argues that a proper explanation of caste could be worked out only by keeping these fundamental differences between the West and the Indian Society.
- Dumont argues, caste was above all an ideology, 'a system of ideas, beliefs and values'.
- In his framework, ideology was an autonomous sphere and could not be reduced to any other factor or treated secondary to politico-economic factor

#### CONCEPT OF HIERARCHY

- According to Dumont, Hierarchy was the essence of caste. Hierarchy was not merely another name for inequality but a totally different principle of social organization
- His notion of hierarchy was almost the same as that of Bouglé – who has explained caste by referring to three principles, viz., hierarchy, occupational specialization and mutual repulsion.
- Hierarchy, defined as superiority of the pure over the impure, was the keystone in Dumont's model of caste system.

#### STATUS & POWER

- In a typical caste system, those who were the most powerful politically & economically did not necessarily enjoy the highest status in the society.
- Likewise those who enjoyed the highest status (the Brahmins) could be economically poor & might have little political clout.

- The distinguishing feature of caste society was the status as principle of social organization was superior to power.

#### CRITICISM ON DUMONT'S THEORY

- It does not correspond with the lived reality of caste : – theory has been derived from the study of some selective classical Hindu texts – ignored the large amount of empirical literature – produced by professional social anthropologists in form village studies and monographs
- Dumont has tried to develop a theory of caste that was supposed to apply to the entire Indian subcontinent.
- However, at empirical level, there existed significant variations in the system of caste hierarchy from region to region

#### CRITICISM

- Status and power are not independent of each other – He argued that, the ritual hierarchy functioned independently of the considerations of power and wealth.
- Berreman has argued that the power-status opposition is a false dichotomy - they are two sides of a coin – He quoted examples of Raj Gonds who were rulers & emerged a powerful caste group.
- Dumont works with a false dichotomy between the "traditional" & "modern" societies
- Dumont's theory gives no agency to the individuals who practice it
- Dumont does not acknowledge the social movements against the caste ideology : – There was a long list of social mobilizations against Brahminical dominance in modern as well as in the pre-modern India – From Buddhism to Bhakti to Sikhism to neo Buddhism, there had been strong