

Change And Persistence Of Caste In Modern India

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Abstract

Indian society has undergone a process of rapid transformation after independence. This transformation has had an effect on all important institutions of traditional Indian society. Caste system is no exception. Caste system has also undergone and is still undergoing a process of adaptive change. Change is particularly, significant in the ritual and economic dimension of caste. In traditional Indian society caste system formed the basis of village economy. The economic context of inter-caste interaction has been termed as Jajmani system.

Keywords - Ritual and Secular dimension, Jajmani System, Sanskritization, Caste-centric, Jajmani Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the hierarchy in caste system has had two dimensions viz., ritual dimension and secular dimension. Ritual dimension refers to the purity status of a caste and the rituals observed by caste based on that status. Ritual dimension also manifested itself in inter-caste interaction. The caste hierarchy was also a ritual hierarchy in which different castes were ranked in terms of their ritual purity status. At the same time, there existed secular basis for the ranking of castes. Thus, the caste hierarchy was based on differential distribution of secular attributes among different caste groups. These secular attributes were wealth or ownership of land, access to political power or the numerical strength. To a large extent, there was an overlap between the ritual and secular aspects of caste. For example, majority of wealth, and ownership of land and political power have largely been concentrated in the hands of 'twice-born' castes, who also enjoyed a superior ritual status. On the other hand, Shudras and untouchables castes, who had a low ritual status, were also deprived of the secular attributes. Both ritual and secular dimensions were equally important in the hierarchical ranking of castes.

Thus an attempt to gain mobility in the caste hierarchy needed an improvement in both secular as well as ritual status. In fact, 'Sanskritization' was nothing but an attempt to gain a higher ritual status after having improved one's secular status. In fact, acquisition of higher ritual status served as a recognition of the improvement in secular status.

However, certain process of change which had started during the British rule but acquired momentum after independence, have brought about changes in the system of ranking of castes. One such change being in declining importance of ritual dimension of caste. The ritual dimension of caste; has declined very significantly in the urban and even in the rural areas the decline is perceptible.

Increasing secularization of inter-personal inter-action in the day to day life. This change is quite obvious in urban areas and is gradually spreading to rural areas too. Increasing pre-occupation of people with improving the quality of life has measured in terms of levels of consumption.

The process of economic development involving growth of capitalistic agriculture and the expansion of industries and the services sector. This has led to the expansion of occupational opportunities which the 'ritually neutral'. Recruitment to these new occupations is based on technical skills acquired through modern education. Also various avenues have come into existence to increase income and acquire wealth. Thus economic success is becoming means for status enhancement irrespective of the ritual status. The declining importance of ritual dimension as a consequence of economic development can further be verified from the fact that increasingly Sanskritisation is losing its appeal as a means of social mobility.

Most jobs in modern industry and state bureaucracy are new in content and method and are viewed as "ritually neutral" persons of any caste including untouchables and Brahmins may fill them. Thus, when persons belonging to different caste with different ritual statuses come together in modern occupational settings, the inter-personal inter-action takes place in a secular idiom. The ritual dimension is ignored. The net result of these changes is that the ritual dimension of caste system has lost its importance especially in the urban area. The urban public transport, restaurants, factories and offices are the places where inter-personal interaction takes place in a purely secular idiom. However, the change in the ritual aspects of caste in urban areas, is by no means total. Beliefs in the ideas of purity and pollution and caste rituals still persist even in the cities. For example, 'clean-caste' Hindus are not ready to do the 'filthy' work of sweepers, and few will be ready to defile themselves by working with raw leather. Thus, even today various occupations which are considered polluting are confined to ritually inferior castes. Although inter personal inter-action outside the home has become secular but inside the home caste rituals and the ideas of purity and pollution are observed even now.

Even in the rural areas there is a gradual decline of the ritual dimension as has been shown by numerous studies. In Chanukhera village studied by Prof. Yogendra Singh, it was found that Brahmins who were at the top of ritual hierarchy were given importance only on ritual occasions. Prof. Yogendra-Singh, says that Kshatriyas would greet the Brahmins first using respectable expressions: on ritual occasions they would even touch the feet of Brahmins priests. But in secular matters such as social gatherings, decision making process, etc., they would expect subordination from the Brahmins which they usually received.

Even in seating arrangements on secular occasions Brahmins had a lower seat than Kshatriya. Similarly, Beidelman observes that in Senapur and Rampur Brahmins were subordinated to Jats and Thakurs who constituted the dominant caste. Only in those villages where Brahmins also possessed the secular attributes like land ownership, political power, etc., did they enjoy the dominant status as can be seen in the case of tHavik Brahmins in TottaGade village in Mysore. Thus secular attributes as increasingly gaining importance over the ritual status.

Democratic decentralisation of power right up to grassroots level has led to increased participation in the political process 2: besides economic success, access to political power has become another means of status enhancement.

Further, the policy of protective discrimination towards the backward castes and increasing politicisation has led to horizontal mobilisation as a result of which different castes are keen on preserving their identity, and are no longer willing to acquire the status of a ritually superior caste.

In traditional Indian society caste system formed the basis of village economy. The economic context of inter-caste interaction has been termed as Jajmani system. Each caste had an occupational specialty, though at times specialized occupational caste did perform multiple occupations. Agriculture was a caste free occupation; in which all castes except perhaps the Brahmins and the land owning dominant caste, participated. Jajmani system was essentially a system of production and exchange of goods and services. Jajmani relations were centred around the land owning dominant caste. Various occupational caste rendered services to the land owning caste round the year and in return for these services they were paid in kind at the harvest time. The conditions of work and share of each occupational caste in the harvest were governed by customary rules. One of the considerations which determined the share of occupational caste was its rank in the local caste hierarchy. Thus, the relations in the local Jajmani system were non-market, non-reciprocal type. The land owning dominant caste maintained paternalistic ties towards the occupational caste. The village economy based on Jajmani system was an essentially a subsistence economy where the production was primarily oriented towards consumption and there was no attempt to generate surplus for the market. Thus Jajmani system while providing a large measure of self-sufficiency to the village economy also rendered it a stagnant economy.

However, gradually Indian economy has been undergoing change. This process of change started with the establishment of the British rule. The new system of land revenue introduced by the British led to partial monetisation of rural economy. However its impact in terms of modernisation was nil.

After independence with the help of centralized planning deliberate attempt has been made to transform Indian economy. These changes include near total monetisation of the economy and expansion of

market system in rural areas, capitalist transformation of agriculture, industrialization and consequent urbanization. All these changes had a bearing on the economic functions of caste.

Firstly, these changes have led to the break down of Jajmani system. As has been shown by the numerous studies, for example,

John Hitchcock's study of Kholhapur village' in U.P. has shown how the establishment of sugar factories led to breakdown of the Jajmani relations. Further, capitalist transformation of agriculture and monetisation of economy has replaced has traditional Jajmani ties with contractual relations between land owning castes and the landless castes. Agriculture has now become a commercial activity oriented to generate profit. This has led to migration of members of landless castes to urban areas. Thus caste as a system has broken down in most of the rural areas. But caste groups have survived and caste awareness remains.

With industrialisation, new occupational structures have developed in urban areas. These new occupations are caste free occupations. Recruitment to these occupations is based upon technical skills which can be acquired through modern education only. Thus, caste has ceased to be the basis of recruitment to occupations.

Though, some continuities are to be found among the migrant to urban areas in terms of caste status and new occupation. For example, "pollution" occupation like scavenging or dealing in leather etc., are consciously avoided by clean caste' Hindus Thus such lowly menial occupations continue to be performed by ritually inferior caste. Similarly, in some of the Sough Indian towns it has been found that Brahmins have taken to restaurant management, because due to their high ritual status food cooked by them acceptable to all. Continuities can also be found in the case of other castes, like often the business activities in urban areas are in the hands of persons belonging to "Vaishya' community. But increasingly, the caste is getting de-linked from modern occupations.

As Lloyd Rudolph has said, "modernity has entered into Indian character a not replacement". Thus, although caste has lost its earlier economic functions, as a result of modernisation, but it continues to survive and it has acquired new forms. Castes in their new role have acquired the form of associative type of organisations. Thus, we find the growth of caste associations in all parts of India. These caste associations function more like an interest groups and try to promote the interest of their members. G.N. Ramu on the basis of a study of Kolar Gold Fields has pointed out that these caste associations perform two types of functions: Expressive functions and Instrumental functions. Expressive functions refer to the sense of social and emotional solidarity that caste associations can bring among its members. The behaviour of individuals • tend to be "caste-centric" because the caste associations provide then a sense of identity and security. The instrumental functions refer to the interest group like behavior of these caste associations whereby they provide various facilities to their members like hostels, educational institutions, banks, etc. These facilities help their members of enhance their economic interest. For example, in almost

all states there are caste hostels and educational institutions. In South India we find the Vysya Bank, Kaniyara Bank and Co-operative Banking associations established by Chettivars, a trading caste, etc. Also these caste associations try to help their members in gaining benefits from various developmental programmes and policies of the Government. Or late, the new phenomena has come to be seen. A number of caste clusters have joined hands to form various organizations to promote the class interests of its members. Some of the recent examples are Bharatiya Kisan Union led by Mahendra Singh Tikait and Shetkari Sanghathan led by Sharad Joshi. Vanniyars in Tamil Nadu have also been agitating for the interests of their members. Thus the economics functions of the caste has undergone transformation, but the caste as a unit of social organization has survived because it has successfully adapted itself to new functions. Today caste has taken over functions which are normally performed by the welfare state.

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