

Lecture 16:

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Functions and Dis-functions of Caste System:

Each and every society has its own way of stratification. An un-stratified society with a real form of equality is impossible. If we look back to the history there is no evidence of such society. Indian society is stratified basing upon the caste system. The caste division is rooted in the Varna system of traditional Hindu society.

It was divided into four strata Brahmin, Kshyatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Gradually Varna System was diverted to caste system, as Varna system was divided and sub-divided into castes and sub-castes. Caste system is very complex and complicated because of which it is very difficult to define.

According to Sir Herbert Risely, “Caste is a collection of families, bearing a common name, claiming a common descent, from a mythical ancestor, human and divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.”

To define caste Ketkar says that it is a group having two characteristics:

(a) Membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born.

(b) The members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.

Maclver and Page defined caste “When status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste.”

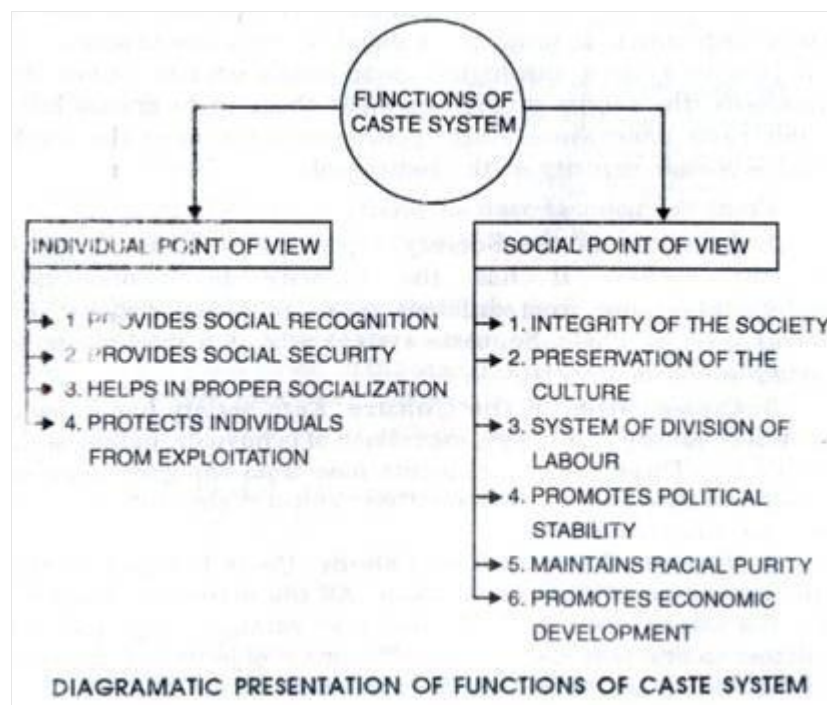
For D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan, ‘caste is a closed group’.

Functions of Caste System:

All the functions of caste system can be categorized under two:

(a) From Individual Point of View

(b) From Social Point of View



From the individual’s point of view caste provides opportunities to the individual to develop in the society.

1. Caste Provides Social Recognition:

All the caste categories are based on the principle of purity and pollution. The pure castes get high social status without any achievement. By ascription, a Brahmin gets high status.

2. Provides Social Security:

If any individual faces the problem of getting security from the family, caste protects the person. For example, if a child becomes orphan and nobody is there to look after the child, then the caste/sub-caste takes the responsibility of child.

3. It Solves Economic Problem:

As each and every caste is attached with an occupation, and as it is hereditary in nature, one can follow his traditional occupation. Through his specialized occupation one can solve his economic problem.

4. It helps in Socialization:

Each caste has its own rules and regulations to control the behaviour of its members. Through these, caste can guide the individual behaviour. A caste introduces its members in the wider social circle. The pattern of taking food, wearing dress, keeping relations with other castes etc. give the individual an identity in the society.

5. Protects Individual from the Exploitation:

Caste acts as a trade union. It protects its members from the exploitation. In jajmani system, the higher caste people cannot exploit the kameens (the service giving castes) as these caste groups have their caste panchayats. Caste panchayat looks after the social and economic security of the individual.

From the point of view of society:

1. Integrity of the Society:

Caste helps in the integrity of the society. It has the capacity to accommodate individuals/groups from different races, religions, regions and forms a social whole. So, caste system acts as a mechanism to maintain social integrity.

2. Preservation of the Culture:

Each society has its own way of acquiring knowledge, expression of behaviour, habits, style of life etc. These cultural elements pass from one generation to another. Caste helps in passing those cultural elements through the socialization process.

3. System of Division of Labour:

Caste is based on the unique system of division of labour. All the activities necessary for the society have been divided into various categories and allotted to different caste groups. The main objective of this sort of division of labour is smooth functioning of the society.

4. Promotes Political Stability:

In the caste system the political power is given to one category, i.e. Kshatriyas. No other caste is allowed to compete with Kshatriyas to have political power. So it avoids political competition, conflict and violence. It creates a situation of political stability in the society.

5. Maintains Racial Purity:

Caste system follows the strict rule of caste/sub-caste endogamy. Endogamy (marriage within one's own caste/sub-caste) helps in maintaining and preserving the purity of blood.

6. Promotes Economic Development:

In caste system each caste is allotted a specific occupation. When a caste continues a profession generation after generation it is obvious that it can produce qualitative things. Because of this reason many handicraft items of India gained international recognition. It helps in the economic betterment of the individual and also economic- development of the society.

Dysfunctions of Caste System:

Caste system has also many demerits. Hindu society is facing various problems due to caste system.

1. Creates Social Obstacles:

Caste system divides society into- many groups. Each group is attached to rigid social norms and values, because of which normal interaction among the categories is not possible. So, it is a hindrance to social progress.

2. Slow Social Change:

All the caste groups have to follow certain fixed and rigid rules and regulations. The basis of these rules and regulation is the principle of 'Purity and Pollution'. One has to conform the traditional norms and values to maintain the principle. So, the change occurs in the society is very slow.

3. Hinders Economic Progress:

Three things are responsible for creating economic hindrance in connection to caste system.

Firstly, caste system is based on the unequal distribution of wealth.

Secondly, low caste people are allotted occupations which give them low income.

Thirdly, it denies social and occupational mobility.

4. Creates Social Dis-organisation:

When caste was originated the main objective was to unify the society. But now Hindu society is divided into so many castes and sub-castes. Caste conflict, caste tension and caste rivalry are very common in the society. So, it is not serving its purpose rather it is dividing the society and creating the situation of social dis-organisation.

5. Political Conflict:

Caste system also breeds political conflict. Involvement of caste in democratic system creates conflicting situation in the political field. Political parties are using caste as their means to get vote.

6. Low Status of Women:

Caste system is related with child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, sati system etc. Caste system gives low status to women by denying education and also they were denied to perform priestly functions.

7. Untouchability:

Only caste system is responsible for the suffering of a particular section of the society who are untouchables. They are suppressed and exploited by the high caste groups.

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