

Module name/ title: Caste System and Identity

Paper: Media and Margins

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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Media and Communication Studies
Paper Name	Media and Margins
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Module ID	P9M12
Pre-requisites	
Objectives	
Keywords	

Introduction:

The study of inequalities in society has always been one of the important areas of understanding in sociology. In this module you will learn about the meaning of caste as a concept and as an institution along with various other important concepts associated with it, including its features. Social stratification in different forms is a universal phenomenon. However, the traditional pattern of social stratification in India continues to attract many scholars and researchers due to its complexities and uniqueness. Knowledge of the caste system leads to the understanding of the contemporary Hindu society and provides us an insight into the society that practices it. You will also learn how in India, caste forms a very important ground for one's identity formation which continues to act as a major indicator for one's life-chances and status in the society. In the previous chapters, you must have read about the understanding of the concept of marginalization, after which it is essential for you to know how the caste system marginalizes certain groups based on their ascribed identity.

Learning Outcome:

This module will help you to grasp the conceptual framework of caste thus providing a better window to understand the Indian society. Also, with the help of this chapter you will be able to connect the dots between the idea of caste and identity and how it reflects in the social, cultural and political setting of the Indian society.

Social Stratification:

The *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines stratification as being “usually applied to studies of structured social inequality; that is, studies of any systematic inequalities between groups of people, which arise as the unintended consequence of social processes and relationships” (Scott and Marshall 2009, 735). The term stratification is used by sociologists to describe inequalities that exist within the human societies between the individuals and groups where they enjoy unequal rewards and status depending upon the position they occupy within the system or society. (Giddens 2009). Caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender are some of the pertinent categories of social hierarchy and differentiation in many societies.

Understanding Caste:

The term ‘caste’ has been one of the most discussed and debated concepts in sociology. The term has been derived from a Portuguese word ‘casta’ meaning ‘pure breed’. Sometimes it implies to a small and more or less localized group; while at times the same word is used to refer to a collection of such groups. Beteille defines

caste as “a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuits by traditions of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system, based on concepts of purity and pollution” (Beteille 1996, 46).

Caste in India denotes the extensive institutional arrangement which in Sanskrit is denoted by the two terms *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* meaning colour refers to the division of the Hindu society into four orders, viz., *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *Shudra*. This understanding excludes the ‘outcastes’/‘Untouchables’ from the structure as they were considered to be impure/polluted. *Jati*, on the other hand, is a term that means species or kinds and is commonly used to refer to the institution of caste in India along with the word caste.

There have been many debates among scholars regarding the link between the concept of *varna* and *jati*. In the essay *Varna and Caste*, M.N. Srinivas tried to show the distinction that existed between *varna* and caste. According to him, a layman’s view of *varna* simply means the division of the Hindu society into four orders. According to him, the *varna* scheme refers only to the broad categories of society and overlooks the existence of other effective units that are very much integral to the society and its structure. Also the kind of image as shaped by *varna* is unclear. To understand the caste system properly, one has to look beyond the *varna*. Unlike the idea that *Brahmins* are placed at the top and the untouchables at the bottom, the positions occupied by each caste in the local hierarchy might be regionally different. Therefore, while the four *varna* classification is common to all of India, the hierarchy in terms of *jati* may have more local classifications that might vary regionally.

The Caste System:

There are several theories and approaches that have been employed by both Indian and Western scholars to understand the functioning of caste system in India. However, the caste system can be understood on the basis of the combination of two sets of principles – one in the form of difference and separation and other in the form of wholism and hierarchy. Difference and separation denotes to the restrictions on inter caste interactions which reflect in marriages, sharing of food as well as other forms of social interactions. Wholism and hierarchy, on the other hand, is based on the concept of purity and pollution under which certain caste groups (upper castes) are considered to be ritually pure while the lower castes are considered to be polluting. For example, the Brahmins used to be involved with all the religious acts and rituals thereby occupying a higher status in a caste society. In Louis Dumont’s essay, ‘*Hierarchy, Status and Power: The Caste System and its Implication*’, the notion of hierarchy holds an essential place. Hierarchy implies the opposition between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’, which also determines its conflicting nature. It also suggests the relation of encompassing and being encompassed. According to him, in the caste system, the ‘principle of purity’ encompasses the ‘impure’ (Gupta, 1992).

Stereotype: Stereotypes are fixed and inflexible characterization of a group of people often applied to ethnic and racial groups and women.

The nature of the Indian caste system is very complex to describe it through certain specific features. Yet, G.S. Ghurye in his book, *Caste and Race in India* (1969), states the six important features of the caste system. The intensive and clear features of the caste system, as provided by him, continued to make relevance of the subject matter as in the past.

i) Segmental division of society: Under the caste system, society is divided into various segments which involve sub-divisions within themselves. Each caste has its own traditional social status, functions and rules and regulations. Membership to these groups is determined by birth and therefore mobility from one caste to another is impossible.

ii) Hierarchy: There is a hierarchy of rank and status in caste. Each caste occupies a definite position in this hierarchy. Although such positions are not interchangeable, there might be certain variations, especially among the middle caste groups from region to region.

iii) Restriction on feeding and social intercourse: Members of different caste groups must follow certain rules about food and food sharing which controls the social interactions of different caste group members. There are rules regarding what kind of foods can or cannot be eaten by a caste group, especially among the upper castes. Also, there are widespread beliefs of 'pollution by touch' which requires the members of different caste to maintain social distance from one another.

iv) Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections: Isolation of individual castes or of groups of castes, especially in rural areas, is an important marker of civil privileges and disabilities. Such practice has more or less prevailed in a distinct way all over the country. For example: the lower castes that are considered impure are still not allowed to enter temples in certain places.

v) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation: Under caste system occupation of each caste is predetermined. Each caste group is traditionally associated with a caste occupation. Restrictions were always imposed on the certain lower caste groups in choosing occupations identified with the upper caste groups. This practice is still prevalent in many parts of the country.

vi) Restriction on marriage: Caste groups are endogamous, which means that marriages are restricted to members within their caste groups.

Sanskritisation: Sanskritisation is a term coined by M.N. Srinivas which refers to a process whereby members of a caste group (generally lower caste groups) attempt to raise their social status by adopting the rituals, domestic and social practices of higher castes.

Caste System and Identity:

Caste forms a very important ground for one's identity formation which continues to act as a major indicator for one's life-chances and status in the society. By now we have understood that caste identity is ascribed - meaning one is born into a particular caste. One cannot choose to be in a particular caste and also cannot change it. However, there might be a few instances where a person might be expelled from a caste group due to his/her inability to follow the rules of their caste group. In order to understand the relationship between the caste system and identity, it is important to explore caste in the pre and post-independence period.

Jodhka (2015) emphasizes three types of changes in the caste system: those coming 'from below', that is from low-caste social movements, those 'from above', i.e. constitutional provisions or state policies in favour of the victims of discrimination, and changes 'from the side', i.e. changes that were not directly targeted at the emancipation of low-caste people but that had an impact on them eventually. Many scholars agree that caste in its present form is a result of the colonial rule. During the colonial rule, many social institutions in India underwent tremendous changes. During the colonial administration, an official effort was made to collect vital information on caste system through census. This documentation sought to gather information on social hierarchy of the castes. Scholars feel that such formal counting strengthened the otherwise fluid caste system into rigid demarcations. Also, the colonial administration carried out various reform related tasks for the deprived caste groups. Under such reforms, the Act of 1935 gave recognition to the Schedule Castes (SC) and Schedule Tribes (ST). This step also bought the 'untouchables' under the category of SC.

Untouchability: Untouchability is an extreme dimension of the Indian caste system that lays down severe social sanctions against members of castes that occupy the bottom of the caste hierarchy or are placed outside of the caste hierarchy based on the purity- pollution scale.

The post independence period saw the continuation of the same policies including other additions. The extension of special programmes to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), since early years of 1990, was one of the most important additions to the existing policies. Also changes were brought about by several land reforms introduced by the independent state. Such reforms withdrew land rights from the upper castes (absentee landlords) and vested it in the hands of the intermediate castes who used to manage agriculture for the upper caste landlords. This helped them to acquire significant economic power turning them into the 'dominant' castes in the villages, which even today continues to condition the democratic politics of the country. This eventually brought a shift in the power structure of the rural caste hierarchy.

Dominant caste: Dominant caste is another term coined by M.N. Srinivas used to refer to those castes which are demographically stronger than other caste groups in a particular area and were granted land rights by the partial land reforms act after independence.

Apart from the above mentioned reforms, a number of laws were passed to forbid and stop caste atrocities such as the practice of untouchability. However, the most important attempt of the independent state at initiating compensation for the discrimination done towards the lower caste groups, came in the form of 'reservations'. This form of positive discrimination ensured the reservation of seats for the members of SC, ST and OBC in various institutions. All these efforts both deliberate and unintentional made by the colonial rule, independent state as well as non-state initiatives, have contributed into the identity formation among the caste groups in India. This eventually resulted in a complex scenario where caste continued to be an essential component of electoral politics resulting in the formation of caste-based political parties since the 1980s.

Social exclusion: Social exclusion refers to the way in which an individual or a group may become disconnected from full involvement in the wider society.

Over the years, there have been many references made to denote the 'untouchables', most of which continue to be derogatory terms. In 1930s the term 'Harijan', meaning children of God, was introduced by Mahatma Gandhi in order to shun the various derogatory names. However, the most popular term by which the 'untouchables' are referred to in the present times is, 'Dalit'. The term Dalit means

oppressed and broken and it was coined by the leaders of the community to express the sense of repression that they have been subjected to. This term gained popularity with the spread of B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy in the twentieth century. Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism in the year 1956 as a mark of protest against the caste discrimination experienced by him and his people. This act of his initiated mass conversions of Dalits into Buddhism. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a highly symbolic and political act that highlighted their hatred toward Hinduism as well as facilitated them to take control of their new identity directed towards the achievement of greater political advantages (Gupta, 2014).

Gail Omvedt (2011) in his book, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, discusses three major emerging themes on which the Dalit politics rests. These are:

- It posed as a challenge to the very concept of Hinduism which is central to the Indian tradition. The movement sought to overthrow the hegemonic power exercised by the Brahmanic Hinduism.
- The movement attempted to encompass within itself all the sections of oppressed, exploited and marginalized groups such as, adivasis, OBCs, peasants and women who suffer discrimination due to the caste system.
- It is an amalgamation of new economic and political directions with the cultural challenge.

Prejudice: Prejudice refers to the preconceived judgment or attitude held by a member of one group towards another.

The structural and endogamous division of caste groups, the maintenance of the social hierarchy drawn in the caste system and the historical division of labour in accordance with affiliation to specific caste groups, have the ability to impose identity processes among both upper and lower caste groups. It is often argued that social stigma attached to caste as well as caste group affiliations have diverse and at times conflicting connotations for identity processes among caste groups in both ends. The organized arrangement of the caste in-groups and out-groups within the social milieu hosts the possibility of adding to the meaning and uniqueness among both the upper caste and lower caste groups. Dipankar Gupta (20014) restates that castes are often proud of their identity, regardless of the position they occupy on the purity- pollution scale.

Conclusion:

The interaction between caste and identity in India requires a well thought-out ways of dealing with this complex relationship. The political class in India needs to maintain a distinct agenda ensuring discourse on eradication of caste with focus on

development and progress and not just strive for political power based on caste identities. Caste affiliations and caste identity continues to be a source of social security even amidst sharp class consciousness. Social scientists working in or on Indian societies have often assumed that the process of modernization initiated by the colonial administration will eventually break up the caste system and the ideologies revolving around it and give way to the class system. However, modernization has not been able to break the basic foundation of the caste system. The fact that some considerable changes have been witnessed in the caste system also cannot be denied, as it no longer is practiced as rigidly as it was in ancient times (Jayaram 1996). The growing *Dalit* assertion, be it in the form of theoretical or symbolic success has managed to add to the distortion of structure of the caste system. The acknowledgement of the changes in the caste system however doesn't deny the fact that such process is not uniform throughout the country. Although in certain regions we see flexibility in day to day practices in some regions however caste system is characterized by conservation and orthodoxy. Hence, considering the political culture and the strong hold of religion on the lives of most Indians, it would appear too early to think of the existence of a casteless society in the near future.

