

CASTE SYSTEM AND OUR SOCIETY

Before reading this chapter discuss some questions in your class. What are the various castes in your village or city? Does each caste have a particular kind of work to do? Do people today still do the kind of work their caste did in olden times? Which are the aspects of the caste system which people still follow? There must be questions in your mind also about the caste system and its history. To begin with, every student should come out with his/her questions. Then read this chapter and see if your questions have been answered in this lesson.

WHAT IS CASTE?

Today, caste is very much part of our lives in every nook and corner of India. It has been so for hundreds of years. Most Indians identify themselves with some caste or the other. Caste system also allocates status of high and low to people at birth itself. It even makes 'untouchables' of some people in our society. Such people have been subjected to innumerable atrocities by the members of other caste groups.

People in your village or city too must be divided into various caste groups. Their interaction and behavior with each other is probably governed by the rules of their caste.

You must have discussed such issues many times among yourselves. Nevertheless, have you ever paused to think and answer the question: What is caste? How does one identify a caste?

Suppose some people introduce themselves in the following manner:- 'I am Ramu, the driver,' 'I am Gajanan, the pundit,' 'I am Bhiru, the *lohar*,' 'I am Sharatchandra, the teacher.'

- *Would you be able to identify the caste of each speaker? If you can, then list them out.*

For example, you are likely to say that Bhiru belongs to the *Lohar* (blacksmith) caste, but would you say that Ramu belongs to the driver caste? Doesn't that make you wonder why 'blacksmith' or *lohar* is a caste while 'driver' is not? Why do we say that driving is not a caste but a profession? Why do we consider some kinds of work as a caste and others as profession?

Read the possible reasons listed below and then try and decide which of them could be correct.

1. 'Driver' is not a caste because no one is born a driver. A person becomes a driver only after learning how to drive motor cars.
2. 'Driver' is not a caste because there is no rule which says that a driver can only marry the son or daughter of another driver. The son of a driver can marry the daughter of the court clerk, or the daughter of the schoolmaster.
3. 'Driver' is not a caste because there is no rule which says that a driver must share food with other drivers only.

Therefore, driving is a profession and not a caste.

Caste is determined at birth. According to the caste system, a person belonging to a



Fig. 1 Collecting forest produce for sale in towns

particular caste can only marry another person belonging to the same caste. A person from a particular caste can only live and interact with other people belonging to the same caste. He or she can only eat food prepared by someone from the same caste. These are some of the rules that govern caste.

• *Can you now determine, giving reasons, which among the following are castes and which are professions? To help you discuss this better the terms are given in Hindi:*

1. Shikshak
2. Dakia
3. Basod
4. Brahmin
5. Loha Karkhana mazdoor
6. Yadav
7. Harwaha
8. Kumhar

Another aspect of the caste system is quite well known. This is the practice of considering some people to be high born and others as low born. Those who accept the caste system would consider a brahmin to have a higher status than a cobbler, even if the brahmin

is illiterate and the cobbler is a renowned scholar.

Come let us find out whether this kind of belief about caste system was followed in olden times also. If not, then how did it begin and how did it spread and whether at that time anybody protested against this system?

In the previous chapter you have met with many people of olden times such as farmers of north India, Vellala farmers, Paraiyar labourers, brahmins, Shabara forest dwellers, traders and artisans of Siyadoni, small and big kings, *samantas*, etc. You have seen their relationship with other people also. Now we will consider their relationship in terms of caste.

FORMATION OF CASTES

Hapless Hunters Become Untouchables

Nishada, Chandala, Kevat, you must have heard these names before. These were the people who, 3000 years ago, lived by hunting and gathering. By the time of the Buddha and Ashoka, agriculture had spread into the plains of the Ganges and the Yamuna. The forests which were the abode of the *nishada* and *chandala* hunters were gradually cleared and villages were established. In the process, there

were innumerable clashes between the hunter-gatherers and the newly settled villagers. But what chance did the hunters have before the might of the iron swords and arrows of the settlers? The forests eventually gave way to villages and cities.

Where could these hunters go? Many hunters migrated to other forests. However, many of them began living around the villages and cities. How did they earn their livelihood now?

The villagers and city dwellers needed various kinds of natural produce - wood, bamboo, hides, tubers, fruits, honey, etc. Many hunters now began collecting such produce from the forests to sell them in the cities. In exchange for such produce they got grain, clothes, iron, etc.

With time, the number of tribal hunters living around villages and cities increased considerably. They, however, were not permitted to live within the villages and cities like other people. They were forced to live on the outskirts. The villagers and city dwellers also began using them to do various jobs which they themselves did not like to do. These jobs, however, were very necessary for their survival. Jobs like killing animals for their meat, disposing off dead animals, skinning animals for their hides, tanning these hides and making leather goods from them, fishing, cutting wood, cremating dead bodies and so on. Such work was considered unclean and dirty. So the helpless *nishada* and *chandala* were forced to do them. They were not permitted to do any other kind of work. Soon the village and city dwellers began saying "These people do dirty work, therefore they are unclean. We will become unclean if we touch or look at them." So these hunters began to be looked upon as untouchables. Those born to them were also

considered untouchables and could only do those unclean jobs reserved for untouchables when they grew up.

The village and city dwellers looked upon the hunters with hatred and contempt. Their customs, rituals, speech and dress were quite different from those of the village and city dwellers. For this reason the hunters were not allowed to mix with the other people - they were kept apart. They could only intermix and marry among other untouchables. The untouchables continued worshipping their old gods and goddesses and following their old customs and rituals.

By the time of Harsha (600 AD), more forests had been cleared and converted into farmland. With the spread of irrigation, there was a manifold increase in work on the farms as well as the demand for labour to do this additional work. The untouchable castes were made to work in the fields, but they were not permitted to own any land.

You have met Paraiya labourers in Talaichchangadu village. These Paraiya labourers were considered untouchables. Did the Paraiyas own any land in Talaichchangadu village?

Fig. 2 Those considered untouchable were forced to live outside the city walls



The entire society thus depended on the labour of these untouchables. Yet they were considered base and were constantly insulted by others. These people, who once moved and hunted freely in the forests and were masters of the jungle, now had to face innumerable insults and serve others.

• *Why did the hunters settle down in villages and towns despite being considered untouchables? What difficulties did they face in living near the villages and cities and what advantages did they get in return?*

Caste Rules Become Universal

From very early times brahmins considered themselves as the purest and highest group in society. On the other hand the lowest status was given to the untouchables. Rulers of the kingdoms, which were emerging in different parts of the country were, considered kshatriyas and given higher status while farmers were given the lower status of shudras. Many types of traders and artisans with whom you met in Siyadoni were now organised as different castes such as carpenters (*badhai*), potters, blacksmiths, gardeners, *kahars*, *tambulikas*, goldsmiths, *gandhikas*, *banias*, etc.



Fig. 3 Brahmin writers

Rules were being formulated for everybody in society to decide who will have higher status and who will have lower status; who can marry or dine with whom; who will serve whom, etc.

The brahmins of this time placed a lot of emphasis on these caste rules. They even incorporated many of these rules into their holy books, the *Dharmashastras*. They began claiming that those who refused to do the work of their ancestors - their caste - were guilty of wrongdoing. Those who married outside their caste were also condemned. They wanted such wrongdoers to be punished.

There was a serious attempt at ordering people into high and low status castes. For example, it is written in a *Dharmashastra* that even if a brahmin and a shudra commit the same crime, the brahmin should be given a lighter punishment than the shudra. If a person of high caste borrows money, he should be charged a lower interest. Only the high castes may wear silken and embroidered clothes. The lower castes must wear only old and tattered clothes. The high castes can live a life of leisure. The lower castes should always serve them. Only the high castes could enter the temple and pray to god. The lower castes were not permitted to enter temples.

Brahmins even advised the kings to mete out punishment to those who disobeyed the caste rules. They claimed that if these rules were not strictly implemented, there would be a breakdown of order in society. "If the untouchables and artisans do not serve the higher castes what will happen to the kingdom?" they asked. They, therefore, insisted that caste rules be strictly enforced.

• *What do you think was the importance of rules like not doing the work of other castes or not marrying into other castes? Discuss.*

However it appears that rules were never strictly followed. You may have noticed this in your own life. How many times have you seized

the opportunity to do something you very much wanted to do, even though you have been strictly forbidden from doing so? Similarly, though caste rules were established, they were often ignored. History tells us that there were shudras who became kings, even though the caste rules do not permit this. Similarly, a kshatriya ruler often married outside his caste for political and other reasons. Such examples are in plenty. Despite such violations, caste rules were adhered to more rigidly in those days than they are today.



Fig. 4 The velir people with their priest and chief

called Murugan. The *Velir* were farmers. As time went on, the tribal chief took on the title of king and invited brahmins to settle in his kingdom.

When the brahmins settled among the *Velir* tribes, they introduced elements of the caste system into Tamil society. The chief was made a king of the kshatriya caste. The priest became a brahmin. He was taught the Vedas and the practice of offering *yagnas*. He was called a *Dravida* brahmin. The brahmins then incorporated rest of the *Velir* peasants into the shudra caste. They were called *Vellalas*. You read about the *Vellalas* in the chapter on Talaichchangadu village.

- *How far these rules are observed in your family and society?*
- *Think of four examples to show that strict caste rules are not followed today.*

Caste System Spreads Over the Entire Country

In the beginning, the caste system was confined to the plains of the Ganges and the Yamuna and to the older *janpadas* like Malwa. Caste was not a feature in other regions of the country. For example, Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Assam and Kashmir were free of the caste system at that time.

As empires and kingdoms were established in various regions and as brahmins began settling down in different parts of the country, the caste system spread. The following two examples show how this happened.

There were many large and small tribes scattered over Tamil Nadu. One such tribe was the *Velir*. Like most other tribes, it had its headman and its own priest. The priest offered animal sacrifices and danced and sang in obeisance to the mother goddess and the god

- *Velir tribals got divided into three castes. They were, Dravida and shudras.*
- *Those brahmins who were invited by the Velir kings considered themselves higher/equal/lower than the Dravida brahmins.*
- *The way Velir chiefs became kshatriyas, in the same way the samanta of Siyadoni, too, must have been considered a kshatriya. Even though both of them were considered kshatriyas, could there be any difference between them? Discuss.*



Fig. 5 The chief became a kshatriya and the priest a brahmin

- *Both Shabara forest dwellers and the Vellala farmers of Talaichchangadu village practiced agriculture. Vellala farmers were considered shudras. What could be the difference between them and the Shabara forest dwellers?*

Opposition to the Caste System

Many people from the very beginning opposed the caste system. The first to do so were Gautama Buddha, Mahavira and their followers. They did not accept the rule that the brahmins are the highest and most sacred of all castes. They said it was wrong to

discriminate between people on the basis of their birth. Recall the debate between the Buddha and Ashwalayana you had read about in class 6. There were many other saints who later tried to oppose the caste system and live a life free from discrimination. Such saints lived in all parts of the country. They all condemned caste discriminations in very strict terms. They argued that all human beings are equal before god and that no one is born high or low.

- *Find out about the saints who opposed the caste system.*

In the struggle for independence against the British rule, the freedom fighters realised that for India to emerge as a united and free nation, it is necessary to do away with caste distinctions. How they sought to achieve this - we shall read in class 8.

Today, according to the laws of our country it is a crime to practice untouchability, to discriminate against the *dalits* in public places like the common well, schools, hospitals, hotels, temples, etc. However, despite these laws, caste feelings still exist in our society.

- *In your opinion what should be done to remove caste discriminations?*

EXERCISE

1. Who were considered untouchables first? What were they doing before being labeled thus?
2. What kind of work was assigned to the forest dwellers by the town dwellers? Why were they asked to do such things?
3. Dravida brahmin is a caste - how was it formed?
4. What types of discrimination were there in caste rules? Give some examples. Were there any protests against such discriminations?

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