

The process of sanskritisation which was prominent among the lower castes at one point of time, particularly in the 19th and early 20th century, has been slowed down in the 'sixties and 'seventies'. Earlier many castes hesitated to be called 'backward' despite the poor economic condition of the members. They feared that they would not be able to improve their social status by identifying themselves as 'backward'. But this is no longer true now, as the State has provided certain benefits to the backward castes. These castes have realised that they could improve their status by improving their economic condition rather than observing rituals followed by the upper castes. Now there is competition among the castes to be called 'backward'. Even some of the Brahmin and Rajput Jatis have approached the Government to be classified as 'backward'. The Kolis of central Gujarat followed the rituals of the Rajputs and struggled for three decades to be acknowledged as Kshatriyas. In the past, they used to feel insulted if they were called Kolis. But now they have started calling themselves as Kolis so that they could get material benefits which is the surest way to improve social status. Social status based on the observance of the rituals has increasingly become redundant.

Traditionally caste members have been forbidden to accept cooked food from persons belonging to the Jatis that they considered lower than theirs. These rules have been weakened, particularly in public spheres in urban areas during the last five decades. In their bid to gain broad support base the political elites at district and state level do not hesitate to take food with the caste members belonging to lower strata.

Most of the Jatis are endogamous. A few follow hypergamy generally within the caste cluster. The earlier restrictions on marriage have become flexible. Marriage circles are expanding in some castes. With education and urbanisation, instances of inter-caste marriages among the upper and middle castes have somewhat increased though such cases are still exceptions.

22.5 REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Caste structure in terms of hierarchy and boundary for interaction between the social groups is more or less neat and identifiable at the village level. But it is not so at regional level. And to draw empirically based macro picture of castes at the national level is all the more difficult and hazardous. Caste structure has not developed uniformly in all regions of the sub-continent. Assam has developed a loose caste structure with less rigid hierarchy than that of Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. It is the same regarding observation of caste specific rules.

The number of castes also varies from region to region. Gujarat has a larger number of castes than West Bengal. Different historical experiences have contributed to shaping of the present day socio-political processes in different regions. Moreover, there is and had been uneven economic development in the country and also within the states. Some regions had zamindari and some had royatwari land tenure system. Generally, Rajputs in Rajasthan or Brahmins in Tamilnadu were enjoying dominance in the farmer and peasant castes like Marathas in Maharashtra and Patidars in Gujarat were dominant castes. All castes do not have uniform numerical strength and spread. Some have a larger number of members and some are very tiny. Some are scattered throughout the region and some are heavily concentrated in a few geographical pockets. Hence, the role and position of caste in relation to politics varies from time to time, area to area and caste to caste.

22.6 CASTE AND CLASS



According to some scholars, caste system is essentially a class system. It was essentially so in the early formative years. The classes were: Rajanyas or the Kshatriyas, the aristocracy, the Brahmins, the priests, the Vaishyas, the people at large, mainly peasants and traders, and the Shudras, the service communities. There are various theories of the origin of the system. Some believe that the system was created by the Divine Power for maintaining harmony in society. Accordingly, one gets birth in a particular caste because of one's karma of the previous birth. Others believe that the system has been evolved in course of time with the development of economic surplus. It came into existence with economic divisions; or the invaders to subjugate the local tribal population created it.

A number of village studies of different parts of the country carried out in the post-independent period show a certain amount of overlap between twin hierarchies of caste and land. M.N. Srinivas observes, "The village community consisted of hierarchical groups, each with its own rights, duties and privileges. The caste at the top had power and privileges, which were denied to the lower castes. The lower castes were tenants, servants, landless labourers, debtors and clients of the higher castes." Data from two Tamilnadu villages collected by Sivkumar and Shivkumar in the late seventies show that 59 per cent of Mudaliyars (upper castes) and 4 per cent of Palli (untouchable castes) are rich peasants or landlord households. No Mudaliyar is engaged as an agricultural laborer, whereas 42 per cent of Palli households earn their livelihood as farm labourers. A study of six Rajasthan villages carried out by K.L.Sharma in the 'seventies offers a similar pattern'. "Only 12.5 per cent of the lower class households belong to upper castes, 60 per cent of the higher class households belong to the upper castes, 24 per cent of the upper castes belong to the higher class, whereas among the intermediate and lower castes only 6.2 per cent and 1.3 per cent belong to high class respectively."

The Anthropological Survey of India in its Project on "People of India" has studied 4635 communities/castes. The study confirms that the highly placed castes are marked by "(i) a higher position in the regional socio-ritual hierarchy, (ii) better control over land and other resources, and (iii) non-commercial relations with other communities of inferior status.... (The low castes) are placed at the bottom due to their : (i) abject poverty caused by less possession of land and less control over economic resources (ii) socio-ritual degradation based on the notion of purity and pollution, and (iii) traditional engagement in occupations which are considered ritually unclean.

Aggregate data at regional and national level on caste and occupation\land holding give us a similar picture. Table 1 presents caste and occupation data collected by the National Sample Survey (NSS) collected in 1952, analysed by K.N.Raj. The data shows that there is a positive relationship between caste and occupational status. The small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers mainly belong to the low or backward castes and ex-untouchable (scheduled) castes. There is a marginal diversification of occupations among the members of low and the lowest castes in rural areas. However, one should not ignore that a small proportion of lower and scheduled caste households are rich peasants who hire labour and produce marketable surplus. According to the survey carried out by Centre for Social Studies, Surat in Gujarat, 10 per cent of the lower caste and 5 per cent of the scheduled caste households own more than 15 acres of land. The reverse is also true. According to the NSS data 1 per cent of the upper castes and 12 per cent of the middle castes are agricultural labourers. Moreover it may also be noted that there are a few upper castes in some parts of the country whose majority members do not belong to the upper class. Rajputs (upper caste) of Gujarat are a case in point. Their condition in terms of land ownership and other occupation is not significantly different than many OBCs.

**Table 1: Occupational Distribution of Different Caste-Groups ++
Among Hindu Rural Households**

(Millions)

Occupation*	Upper castes	Middle castes	Lower castes	Scheduled castes	Total
Agriculture Farmer	1.09 (24.38)	0.93	1.69 (6.95)	0.18 (1.54)	3.80 (7.35)
Cultivator	1.96 (43.91)	6.52 (53.30)	10.20 (41.79)	3.19 (27.05)	21.67 (41.35)
Share cropper	0.17 (3.91)	0.76 (6.18)	1.51 (6.17)	1.00 (8.50)	3.44 (6.50)
Agri. Labour	0.05 (1.09)	1.46 (11.91)	4.11 (16.85)	4.27 (36.19)	9.89 (18.70)
Forestry, Fishing & Livestock +	0.02 (0.62)	0.17 (1.39)	0.81 (3.31)	0.28 (2.38)	1.28 (2.42)
Total: Agriculture	8.29 (73.91)	9.84 (80.35)	18.32 (75.07)	8.92 (75.66)	40.37 (76.33)
Others@	1.17 (26.09)	2.39 (19.65)	6.09 (24.93)	2.87 (24.34)	12.52 (23.67)
Total: All	2.26 (100.00)	12.23 (100.00)	24.41 (100.00)	11.79 (100.00)	52.89 (100.00)

Notes: Figures in brackets represent percentage of All-India average in each case.

* The main farming occupations are classified into four groups:

- a) Farmer – a tiller who cultivates his own land, mainly with hired labour; (b) Cultivator – one who cultivates land mainly owned by him and sometimes land taken on lease or sharecropping system, with the help of other household members and partly with hired labour; (c) Sharecropper – one who mainly takes up cultivation of others' land on a sharecropping basis and cultivates without hired labour; and (d) Agricultural labourer – one who cultivates others' land either for wages or for customary payment.

+ Includes wood cutters, plantation labour, gardeners, fishermen, animal breeders, cattle grazers and herdsmen.

@ Includes households in the rural sector engaged in administrative and professional services, teaching and medicine, manufacturing – specially of food products and textiles – trade and commerce, transport and communication, construction and sanitation, and mining.

++ According to the NSS, “The upper castes were defined as those who, according to custom, used the sacred thread, the middle as those from whom the Brahmins take water by tradition and the lower as the other castes who were not scheduled.”

22.7 STRATIFICATION WITHIN CASTE

Industrialisation and penetration of market economy in rural areas have affected traditional occupation of several castes. In most of the castes some members have