UNIT 20 CASTE - STRUCTURE AND REGIONAL PATTERNS

Structure

20.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you will be able to

- define the structure of caste in India

- describe the dimensions of regional variation of caste

- explain the relationship between caste structure and kinship, caste structure and occupation, and caste structure and power.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of caste in determining the nature of human groups and human relationships in India should be very evident to you from your study of earlier units of ESO-12. Caste can be identified as the single most important factor in the understanding of rural and urban India and its social, economic and political institutions.

In the previous Block, Block 4 of ESO-12, you learnt about the major religious communities and their social organisation. In this context you learnt about the significance of caste as a system of stratification found in nearly all the communities, especially amongst the Hindus. In this unit, we will tell you more about this system of stratification.

This unit will discuss the structure of caste as a regional reality. It will emphasise and denote the nature of caste groups as they exist in different parts of India. To be precise, a regional perspective of the caste system will be provided in this unit.

We begin by defining the caste structure in section 20.2. Then we have described the dimensions of regional variations of caste structure in India in section 20.3. In the process of presenting this regional profile of caste system in India we have explained to you the relationship between caste structure and kinship in section 20.3.1, caste structure and occupation in section 20.3.2; and caste structure and power in section 20.3.3. Finally, in section 20.4 we have given the summary of this unit.

20.2   DEFINITION OF CASTE STRUCTURE

Caste is a system of social stratification, which lies at the very root of social structure of most social groups in India. By social structure, we mean the persistent pattern of social interaction existing within and among social groups. These patterns of interaction are guided by the **normative system** of the society.

Caste structure is thus a pattern of social behaviour in which groups and individuals are guided by prescribed set of norms, values and sanctions. The groups and individuals occupy specific statuses within and in relation to other groups. In this system individuals are born into a certain caste and thereby acquire the role and status associated with that caste identity.

Sociologists have defined caste or (as locally referred to) *'jati'* as a "hereditary, endogamous, group which is usually localised. It has a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally maximum commensality i.e. interdining occurs within the caste" (Srinivas 1962:3), This definition describes the ideal form of caste system. However in real life there are innumerable variations and **permutations** in terms of structure and functioning of caste system.

Being a dynamic reality, which is highly flexible, it has shown tremendous variations from one region to another. But then we must ask, what is it that enables us to identify a caste? For this we must understand the relationship between the *varna* and *jati* or caste.

20.2.1 *Varna* and Caste

In theory, the caste system is interlinked with the *'Varna'* model which divides the Hindu society into four orders, viz., Brahmana, (Brahman, traditionally, priest and scholar), Kshatriya (ruler and soldier), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudra (peasant, labourer and servant). The first three castes are **'twice-born'** or *'dvija'* since the men from these castes are entitled to don the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of *upanayana*, which the Shudras were not allowed to perform. The untouchable castes are outside the varna scheme.

The term *'varna'* literally means colour and it was originally used to refer to the distinction between *Arya* and *Dasa*, in ancient India. According to the Rig-Veda, it was not applied to any classes, such as Brahman, Kshatriya, etc. However, the classes which existed at that time later came to be described as *varna* and the original distinction between *Arya* and *Dasa* gave place to the distinction between *Arya* and Shudra (Ghurye 1950: 52).

The caste system is an all-India phenomenon of which the *varna* model provides an all-India macro-structural scheme. In other words, the *varna* model only provides a framework within which the innumerable variations of castes throughout India are found. According to Srinivas (1962: 65) the *varna*-scheme is a 'hierarchy' in the literal sense of the term because the criteria of ritual **purity and pollution** are at the basis of this differentiation. Generally speaking, the higher castes are also the better off castes, and the lower castes are generally, the lower classes. However, this association between caste and class is not always true. A caste can be ritually high but ranked lower in the local caste hierarchy because this hierarchy is determined by secular factors like economic, political, educational status also. Thus, one of the most striking feature of caste system, as an actual reality has been the vagueness in the hierarchy, especially in the middle rungs.

According to the *varna* scheme there are only four categories. This scheme excludes the untouchables and its number is same throughout India. But this is not true in reality since even during the vedic period, occupational groups existed which were not subsumed by *varna*, although one cannot be sure whether these groups can be called castes or not. According to Ghurye, in each linguistic region, there are about 200 caste groups which are further sub-divided into about 3,000 smaller units each of which is endogamous and provides the area of effective social life for the individual. Therefore, one can say that the *varna* scheme refers at the most only to the broad categories of the society and not to the actually existing effective units (Srinivas 1962: 65).

Srinivas states that the *Varna* scheme has certainly distorted the picture of caste but it has also enabled ordinary men and women to understand and assess the general place of a caste within this framework throughout India. It has provided a common social language, which holds good in all parts of India. This sense of familiarity, even when not based on real facts leads to a sense of unity amongst the people (Srinivas 1962: 69). Thus, the Indian society (by which we basically mean the Hindu society) has been full of changes and improvisations. But these changes have been against the background of the *varna* hierarchy. It is the *varna* frame which remains more or less constant while castes vary from region to region. Figure 20.1 shows that a varna may include different castes and these castes may divided into different subcastes.

Activity 1

Talk to any five adult persons in your neighbourhood about the relationship between caste, family and occupation. Ask them?

1) What is their occupation?

    What is their father's occupation?

    What is /was their grandfather's occupation?

2) If they are following their father's or grandfather's occupation what has been the changes in terms of skill and technology?

3) If they are not following their caste occupation, then what it the reason for this departure

    Write a note of about two pages and compare it, if possible, with the reports of the other students at your Study Centre.
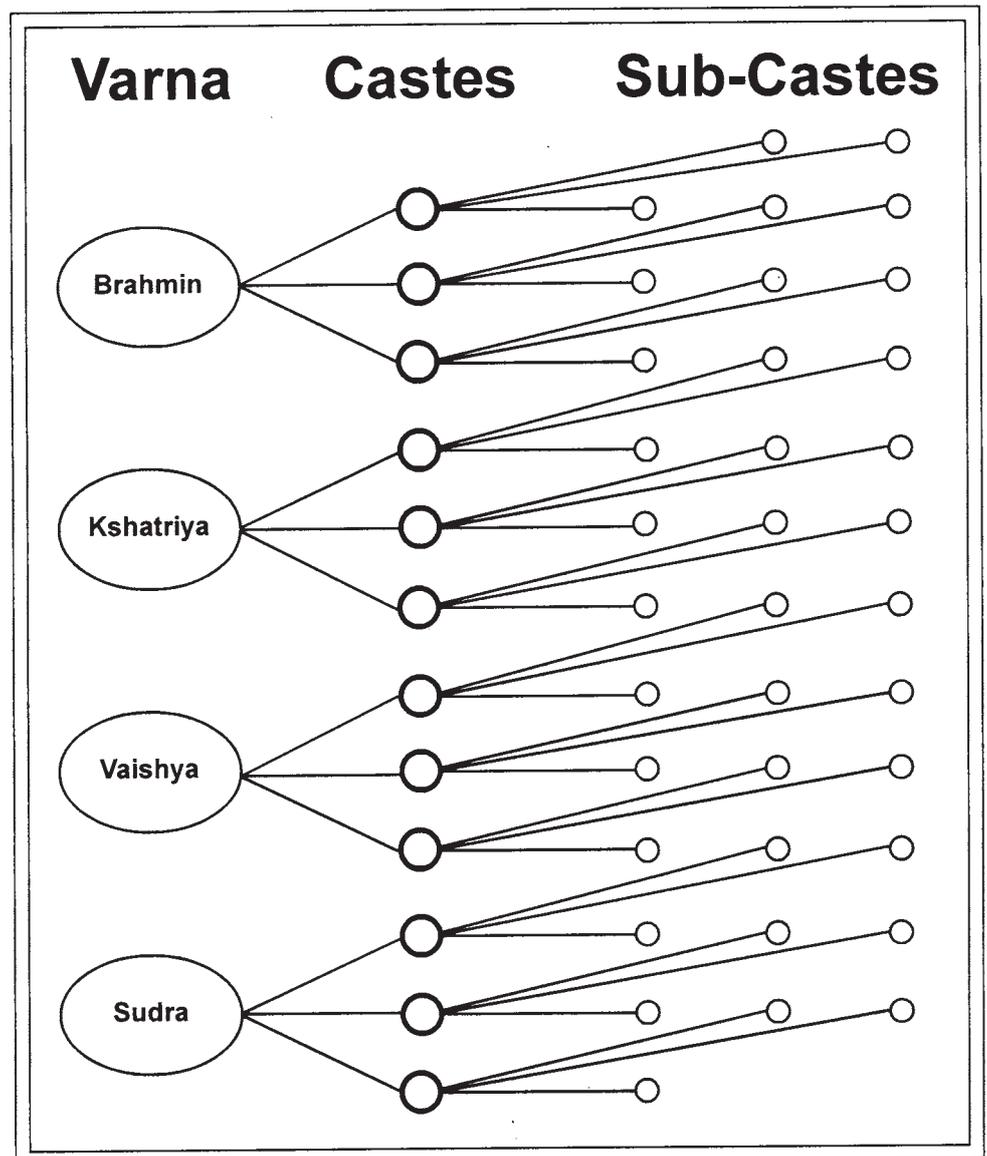
Fig. 20.1: The Varna model of caste system

20.2.2 Features of the Caste System

The main features of caste system are

i)   hierarchy,

ii)   endogamy,

iii) association with a **hereditary** occupation,

iv)   restrictions on food and social intercourse,

v)   distinction in custom, dress and speech, and

vi)   civil and religious disabilities and privileges enjoyed by different sections of   the society (Ghurye 1950: 50).

The Hindu society is divided into segmental divisions of caste. Caste is an ascribed status since caste membership is acquired by birth. The hereditary caste groups are arranged into a social and ritual hierarchy, with Brahmans at

the top, next the Kshatriyas, then Vaishyas followed by the Shudras. In the social hierarchy the lowest rung of the caste society is of the untouchables who are ritually the most impure. Thus, the concept of hierarchy forms the crux of the caste society. Each caste is considered to be more pure or impure than the other in the ritual sense of the term. The very shadow of some castes was once considered polluting. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the Shanar or toddy tappers were to keep 24 paces away from a Brahman. In Kerala, a Nayar could approach a Nambudiri Brahman but could not touch him, and a member of Tiyyan caste was supposed to keep himself at a distance of 36 steps from a Brahman (Ghurye 1950). Therefore traditionally the castes considered to be untouchable were forbidden entry into the upper-caste houses. In South India, even till the British period, certain parts of the town and cities were inaccessible to the untouchable castes.

Endogamy or marriage within one's own caste or sub-caste group is an essential feature of caste system. It is one of the main reasons for the persistence of caste system. People generally married within one's own caste group.

Traditionally, each caste was associated with an occupation. *Jajmani* system, about which you have already learnt in previous units, found in rural India enabled each caste to have a near monopoly over their hereditary occupation. Each caste was also ranked higher or lower on the basis of the ritual purity or pollution of their associated occupations. Thus, the Chamar castes of north India were considered untouchables since their occupation involved use of leather.

Each caste had its own caste council or panchayat where the grievances of its caste members were heard. These caste-councils headed, generally by the elder members of that caste, had the power to excommunicate a member from his or her caste if they did not accept caste restrictions. Caste restrictions operate in marriage, commensality or inter-dining and general social intercourse, as well.

In this section we have given an outline of the essential features of caste system. However caste structure has several variations. These variations are made clear when we examine its functioning in different regions of India. There are basically three dimensions in which we can examine the variations in the caste system. Therefore, in the next section we will begin by discussing the dimensions of regional variations under which we will describe the relationship between caste structure and kinship; caste structure and occupation; and finally caste structure and power.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Define the concept of caste in about four lines.

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ii) List some of the features of caste system in India. Use about four lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks in the following sentences.

a) Caste status is an ……………………………….. status.

b) Ritual …………………………… and …………….……… determines the place of a caste in the caste hierarchy.

c) The term ……………………………. literally means colour.

d) *Varna* is an all India category while …………………………. varies from one region to another.

20.3   DIMENSIONS OF REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Caste as a regional reality can be seen in the different patterns of caste-ranking, customs and behaviours, marriage rules and caste dominance found in various parts of India. For the sake of clarity, we are going to explain the dimensions of regional variations in terms of three aspects: caste structure and kinship; caste structure and occupation; and caste structure and power. However, these are only a few of the regional variations that are outlined here in this unit. In reality great diversity exists between regions as well as within regions.

20.3.1 Caste Structure and Kinship

Caste structure is intimately related to the kinship system amongst the Hindus in India. The sole reason for this relationship lies in the endogamous nature of caste system. Caste is basically a closed system of stratification, since members are recruited on the criteria of ascribed status. In other words, an individual becomes a member of a caste in which he or she is born. Thus it is an ascribed status. Even if there is social mobility in the caste system through the process of Sanskritisation, urbanisation, etc., it is only a positional change rather than a structural change.

A person remains the member of his/her caste irrespective of his/her individual status. Any movement in the structure occurs in the social mobility of the caste group in the local hierarchy of the society, which is only a shifting of its position from one level to another.

Kinship is a method or a system by which individuals as members of society relate themselves with other individuals of that society. There are two types of kinship bonds. One is consanguinal and the other is affinal. Consanguinal ties are ties of blood such as, between mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, etc. Affinal ties are ties through marriage, such as, between husband and wife, man and his wife's brother, etc. (For further details refer back to unit 8, Block 2, ESO-12).

Kinship in India is largely an analysis of the internal structure of the sub-caste. Sub-caste is the largest segment of a caste and it performs nearly all the functions of caste like **endogamy,** social control, etc. For example, (the Brahman caste has several sub-castes like, the Gaur Brahmans, the Kanyakubjis, the Saraswat Brahmans, etc. It is these segments of the main caste of Brahmans, which form the effective functioning group within which social interaction, marriage etc. takes place. However, these segments are also subdivided and have a regional connotation too, like the Sarjupari Brahmans of North India are those who originally lived beyond the river Saryu or Ghaghara.

The effective caste group is the caste population of a single village while the effective sub-caste group within which marriage and kinship takes place is composed of the people belonging to the region around the village having several scores of settlements. Due to the practice of endogamy and restriction in social intercourse a person marries within the sub-caste group, or at the most caste group in India, which extends generally, beyond the village to a larger region.

Kinship system found in various parts of India differs from each other in many respects. However, generally speaking, we can distinguish between the kinship system in the Northern region, the Central region and the Southern region.

North India is in itself a very large region, having innumerable types of kinship systems. This region includes the region between the Himalayas in the North and the Vindhyas in the South. In this region a person marries outside the village since all the members of one's caste in a village are considered to be brothers and sisters, or uncles and aunts. Marriage with a person inside the village is forbidden. In fact, an exogamous circle with a radius of four miles can be drawn around a man's village (Srinivas 1955: 12).

Hypergamy is practised in this region according to which a man takes a wife from a clan which is lower in status to his own clan. That is, a girl goes in marriage from a lower status group to a higher status group within a sub-caste. The effect of this **hypergamy** and village exogamy is that it spatially widens the range of ties. Several villages become linked to each other through affinal and matrilateral links.

In his study of the Ramkheri village in Madhya Pradesh, Adrian Mayer (1960) not only described the Rajput caste and other sub-castes of the village but also the region around it as well.

The clans, lineages, and *kutumbs* are all part of the internal structure of the caste at the same time being part of the kinship organisation. These groups are all the time increasing and branching off with time.

The organisation of family in the northern region is mainly patriarchal and patrilocal. The lineage is traced through the male, i.e. patrilineal system is followed in this region. It is patriarchal because authority lies with the male head of the family and it is patrilocal because after marriage the bride is brought to reside in the house of the bridegroom's father.

Generally, in most of the castes in the north such as the Jats, an agricultural caste of South Punjab, Delhi and Haryana the "four-clan" rule of marriage is followed. According to this rule,

i)   a man cannot marry in the clan to which his father (and he himself) belongs;

ii)   to which his mother belongs;

iii) to which his father's mother belongs; and

iv)   to which his mother's mother belongs (Karve 1953).

In this region a person avoids marriage with kins who are related to him or her five generations on the mother's side and seven generations on the father's side ideally. However, in reality as discovered by Mayer in his study, these rules can be broken in some cases (for further details see unit 8, Block 2, ESO-12).

In the northern region, therefore, marriage with cousins, removed even by two or three degrees is viewed as an incestuous union. In most parts of this region, as mentioned earlier, village exogamy is practised by most of the castes, especially the Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes. This rule is known in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab, as the rule of *Sassan.*

In Central India which includes Rajputana, the Vindhyas, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa we find the general practice of caste endogamy. Hypergamy is most characteristic of the Rajputs of this region and village exogamy is also found in this region. However, in this region especially in Gujarat and Maharashtra amongst some caste communities we find cross-cousin marriages being practised. Here there is a tendency for a man to marry his mother's brother's daughter. But marriage with the father's sister's daughter is taboo. The preference for a single type of cross-cousin marriage seems to move away from the taboo of marrying cousins of any class in the northern region. Thus, in many ways this preference suggests a closer contact with the practices of the southern region.

The Southern region comprises the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala where the Dravidian languages are spoken. This region is distinct from the northern and central regions of India in the sense that here we find basically preferential rules of marriage. Here a man knows whom he has to marry while in most areas in the north a man knows whom he cannot marry.

Most of the parts of the Southern region except some, like the Malabar, follow the patrilineal family system. Here also we find exogamous social groups called *gotras*. The difference between the exogamous clans in the north is that a caste in a village is held to be of one patrician and therefore, no marriage is allowed within a village. Sometimes even a group of villages are supposed to be settled by one patrilineage and marriage between them is prohibited.

In the South, there is no identification of a *gotra* with one village or territory. More than one inter-marrying clans may live in one village territory and practise inter-marriage for generations. Thus, the social groups, which are formed due to this kind of marriage pattern in the South shows a centripetal tendency (of moving towards a centre) as against the centrifugal (of moving away from the

centre) tendency of social groups found in north Indian villages. In the South, a caste is divided into a number of gotras. The first marriage creates obligations about giving and receiving daughters. Hence, within exogamous clans, small endogamous circles are found to meet inter-family obligations and a number of reciprocal alliances are found in South Indian villages.

Apart from castes, which are patrilineal in the southern region, we also find some castes, such as the Nayars of Malabar district who follow matrilineal system of kinship. A typical Nayar household is made up of a woman, her sisters and brothers, her daughters and sons and her daughter's daughters and sons. Amongst the Nayars, property passes from the mother to the daughter. But the authority even in this system lies with the brother, who manages the property and takes care of his sister's children. Husbands only visit their wives in this system. The Nayar matrilineal house is called a *Tharavad* (see figure 20.2). Nayar is a broad category of castes of which not all of them follow the same kinship system (Dube 1974: 26)
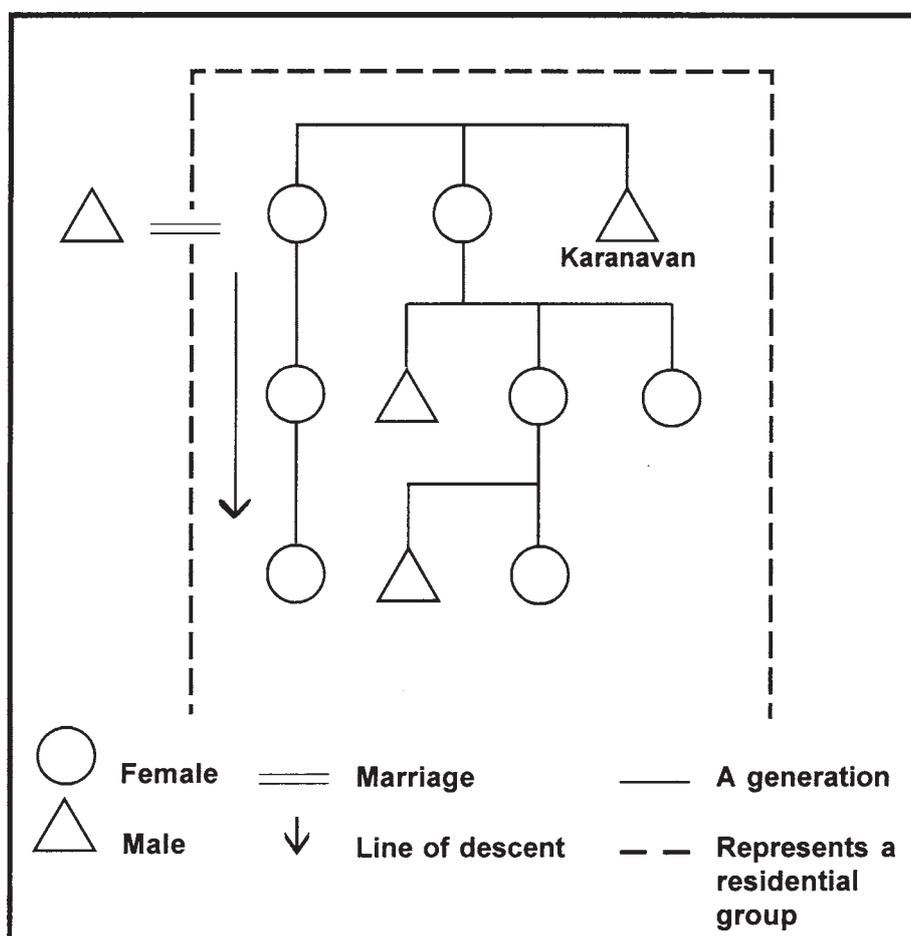
**Fig. 20.2: A Tharavad**

The relationship between the caste structure and the kinship system is so inter-twined that we cannot understand one without understanding the details of the other. In this section we have explained the regional variations found in the relationship between the caste structure and the related kinship pattern. Now let us see the way in which caste is related to occupation.

20.3.2 Caste Structure and Occupation

All over India today we find that caste restrictions are not as meticulously observed as they were some decades ago. The hereditary association of caste with an occupation used to be a very striking feature of the caste system. It was so much a part of the caste system that some sociologists even argued that "caste is nothing more than a systematisation of occupational differentiation" (Srinivas 1965: 1-77). In fact, it can be said that caste was a system, which ensured an occupation to everyone, and therefore it was a method to control competition between social groups in the economic sphere.

However, as Srinivas says, the occupational aspect of the caste system would have broken down completely in the context of a growing population, if not for the surplus population in all occupational categories like artisans, traders, servicing castes falling back on agriculture. Traditionally agriculture was a common occupation for all castes and Brahmans, Kshatriyas and even Vaishyas have been dependent on agriculture.

A caste is considered to be high if its characteristic way of life is high and pure and it is considered to be low if its way of life is low and polluting. By the term 'way of life' we mean whether its traditional occupation is ritually pure or polluting. For example, the occupation of the Brahman Priest is ritually pure while the traditional occupation of a leather working caste like the Chamar of U.P. is considered to be ritually polluting. But the remarkable aspect of caste system is that the presumed hierarchy of 'way of life', which includes diet, occupation, etc. does not often correlate with the observed order of caste ranking found in several regions of India. For example, in spite of the trader castes being vegetarian (which is considered to be ritually higher) in Rampura, a village of Mysore, they are ranked ritually lower than the non-vegetarian peasant castes of the same village (Srinivas: 1955).

Another discrepancy between caste occupation and ritual ranking is that washing, sweeping and such other activities are done by everyone but when the members of the caste whose traditional occupation is to perform those activities do it, then it is considered to be polluting. Thus, it is the traditional association of a caste with an occupation, which determines its rank in the local caste hierarchy (Mckim Marriot 1959).

In the association of caste structure with a hereditary occupation the "*jajmani* system" forms the framework. The *jajmani* system, as you have already read in unit 2, Block 1 of ESO-12 is a system of economic, social and ritual ties between different caste groups in the villages. Under this system some castes are patrons and others are service castes. The service castes offer their services to the landowning upper and intermediate castes and in turn are paid both in cash and kind. The patron castes differ from one region to another depending on the socio-economic and political status of the castes. For example, the Rajput, Bhumihar and Jat are the patron castes in the North and Kamma, Reddi and Lingayat in the South. The service castes comprise Brahman (Priest), Barber, Carpenter, Blacksmith, Water-carrier, Leather-worker, etc.

Thus, to understand regional variations we have to know something about the ownership of land, the land tenure status and adherence to the *jajmani* system. These economic organisations depend a lot on the caste structure and regional topography and vice versa.

There is a congruence between high caste status and land ownership. At the top of occupational hierarchy stands a group of families, which control and own most land rights in the village/region. They also belong to the caste occupying the highest rank. Next in the hierarchy would be estate managers, landowners of relatively smaller size who are drawn from the castes who occupy a position next to the highest ranking castes. Smaller tenants and sub-tenants occupy the middle ranking caste groups. Finally, labourers are drawn from the lowest ranking caste (Such association between caste and class rank and traditional occupation has been mentioned by such sociologists as Ramkrishna Mookherji and Andre Beteille 1966).

The tendency of land ownership by the high castes serves to maintain and reimpose the existing caste hierarchy. However, with the changing times, impact of colonial rule and the consequent introduction of western education, this general association of higher caste with higher class (in terms of ownership of land, wealth and power) has been disturbed (Beteille 1966:3).

However, in spite of these changes the ritual criteria of caste ranking remain important. Although even in the ancient times it was not all-important, as secular criteria of wealth and power of which land ownership is an important aspect did determine the status of a caste. The early nineteenth century account of Abbe Dubois, a famous French philosopher, who travelled extensively in South India, exemplifies this aspect very clearly when Dubois (1928: 23) stated, "thus the caste to which the ruler of a country belongs, however low it may be considered elsewhere, ranks amongst the highest in the ruler's own dominions, and every member of it derives some reflection of dignity from its chief".

When we observe the regional patterns, we find that in the plains of Uttar Pradesh, two or more cultivating castes coexist. There is also the presence of a large number of scheduled caste groups, which have a numerical preponderance in the population. They generally constitute the labour force in this region. Caste groups are many and are heterogeneous in nature. There is a lack of uniformity in ranking and therefore, the caste structure is not well defined as is found in the southern regions.

In Bengal, as Andre Beteille reports, the Hindu population did not have the Kshatriya and Vaishya *Varna*. There was a large assortment of groups at the bottom known collectively as *Chandala* or *Asprishya*, who were technically exterior to the four-fold *varna* scheme. Traditional Bengal had five categories of Brahmans—Saptasati, Madhya deshi, Rarhi, Barendra, and Baidik. Of these the last three have had a recognisable and significant identity and an eminent position in the social hierarchy of Bengal. At the other end of the caste ladder (the only two which were found in Bengal) were the sudras. Sudras were also in turn divided into 'clean' and 'unclean' castes based on their hereditary occupation (Beteille 1977).

In Orissa, as reported by Bailey, in his study of Bisipara, an Oriya hill village, the Warrior castes owned most of the land and combined soldiering with farm management. The outcastes, referred to as *'praja'*, were their servants. The other castes, including the Brahmins were in a position of economic dependence and political subordination to them (Bailey 1966:122-127).

Turning our attention to regions that are clearly dominated by the presence of one agricultural caste we find the case of Haryana and Punjab. In these states we find the dominance of a single agricultural caste referred to as the 'Jats'.

As compared to the north, in the district of Tanjore, we find a clear-cut hierarchy existing in the caste system with Brahmans as land-owners. The Hindu social structure is clearly demarcated between the Brahmans, the non-Brahmans and the Adi-Dravidas. The Brahmans are the landowners; the non-Brahmans are the tenants, sub-tenants service giving castes while the Adi-Dravidas generally constitute the category of landless agricultural labourers (Gough 1966:90)

These are only a few of the regional variations. We have outlined its general pattern to reveal the relationship between caste-structure and occupation. Now in the next section we will examine the relation between caste structure and power.

Activity 2

Recount some incidents in which you overcame your caste restrictions. Write a note of about a page. Compare it, if possible, with the notes written by other students at your Study Centre.

20.3.3 Caste Structure and Power

Central to caste system are caste panchayats and leadership. These power structures are highly formalised in certain caste groups and informal in others. The panchayat literally means a group or council of five. In a village it refers to a group that presides over, and resolves conflict, punishes people transgressing customs and launches group enterprises. It must be remembered that the village panchayat is quite different from the legislative use of the term panchayat. The usage, after the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1922, refers to a statutory local body, formed through elections, vested with legal powers and charged with certain governmental responsibilities. In certain villages traditional caste panchayats and leaders are still a powerful means of control. The democratic panchayat with legislative powers and traditional panchayat may overlap in certain regions.

Regional caste structures, in part, account for variations in their respective power structure. It is important to know what qualifies caste for regional dominance. According to Srinivas (1966), a caste is said to be dominant when it is numerically the strongest in the village or local area and economically and politically exercises a preponderating influence. The status of a dominant caste appears to rest on such criteria as

i)   the control of land and economic resources;

ii)   numerical strength;

iii)   a relatively high ritual status in the caste hierarchy; and

iv)   educational status of its members.

The above factors combine to place a particular caste group in a position of political dominance. A near monopoly of management rights in local resources (usually agricultural land) and control of the same gives the group an ability to

control the lives of the others. Numerical strength alone may not place a group in a bargaining position. It needs an economic power base to backup its strength. Once economic rights are in possession, however the size of a group does become important. The control of resources by members of a dominant caste lead in turn, to making decisions for others, which constitutes real dominance.

Regional variations that account for dominant caste can be explained by

i)   the degree to which a single large land holding caste controls a set of dependent castes,

ii)   rigidity of caste ranking,

iii) the existence of two or more dominant caste groups in a region.

Studies from various parts of India suggest that dominant castes do not exist everywhere. Areas where a landowning group has been able to establish itself in proportionally large numbers, and yet maintain distinctive character (by strictly regulating marriage and descent) that dominance has been possible. Local power flows mainly from land, which is the main source of wealth. Power is safeguarded if it is confined to a unified and numerically preponderant caste group. Numbers alone do not guarantee power. Caste groups numerically preponderant, but with divided loyalties, creating disunity, may not wield power. It is only when a caste group becomes politically united that it becomes a political force. This is very important because in the new democratic political system where every vote counts the numerical preponderance of a caste group gains an additional meaning. Power may also accrue to a *jati*, when its members have effective connections with the power of the village panchayats.

In regions where religious groups and tribals are intermixed and no single caste possesses enough land, power or numerical strength, in such a condition, there is bound to be dual or multiple domination in a region.

The Regional Dimension of Power

After a discussion about the features of dominant caste, let us see how they present themselves in the regional context.

Let us illustrate with examples, the correlation between caste and power structures. Karve (1953), in her study of the Malabar Coast has pointed out certain distinct features present in a region.

The order of dominance among castes parallels the order of caste rank. The exclusive nature of high-ranking castes is further reinforced by ritual notions of purity and pollution. High ranking Brahman castes of this region possess landed wealth, power and control, besides the traditional right to perform rituals; they also have right to religious learning and worship at temples. Subordinate castes are obliged to worship according to their ritual prescriptions and they do not have the right to religious texts like, the Veda, Upanishad, etc. Their economic and political subordination further enhances the dominant position of high-ranking castes. Organisation of ritual and temple services, concentration of land holdings correlates caste rank with secular power and promotes consistency in the total hierarchy of inter-caste relations. In regions where caste and power hierarchy overlap there is a definite concentration of power,

wealth and land invested with high ranking caste groups. Correspondingly ritual sanctions reinforced the superordinate status of upper caste groups and subordinate status of the lower caste groups. Thus, this correlation leads to the minimising of disputes.

Regions, which do not reveal a major correlation between caste and power structures, are characterised by certain features very different from the earlier example. Caste ranking may not be clear-cut and may promote disputes about caste ranking and status within the hierarchy. Caste groups of equal rank may be constantly disputing over their mutual positions in the hierarchy, resulting in dissent and dispute over ranking. Such conflicts get consolidated over a period of time resulting in formalised factions within the caste groups. Factions may promote disputes between them. Lack of clarity in caste ranking results in a diffused power structure, with no single caste group wielding economic, political and ritual clout. The Coromandal region of South East coastal India validates the above arguments.

In the districts of Punjab, Haryana and parts of U.P., especially in the upper Ganges districts, middle ranking castes such as the Jat, Ahir, Kurmi, etc. wield substantial amount of power and hold positions of dominance. The agricultural castes wield substantial power, and are numerically preponderant in some of these regions.

Political and economic interaction among castes in this region, however, forms a somewhat imperfect hierarchy as political and economic power is diffused. Ritual and secular power may not coincide everywhere. The region is marked by a lack of rigid stratification of castes, lack of concentration of political and economic power in a single caste group, resulting in the diffusion of political power.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Describe the relation between caste and kinship in about five lines.

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ii) Discuss one of the ways in which we find a discrepancy between occupational status and the caste ranking. Give an example. Use about six lines.

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iii) Define the concept of dominant caste in about three lines.

....

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20.4   LET US SUM UP

This unit has introduced you to the aspects of regional variations evident in caste structures. This was done by first defining caste structure. Then we have explained the dimensions of regional variations. This we did by relating caste to kinship, occupational and power structures. We have examined the intimate link between caste and kinship system in India. Then we have explained the correlation of caste and occupational structure. Here, we have described the discrepancies between ritual hierarchy and the secular hierarchy relating to the occupation and land ownership pattern of different castes.

Lastly, we have discussed the features of dominant caste, in relation to caste and power structure. A combination of essential features served to make caste groups of varying statuses prevails in a dominant position. We also noted how certain areas show a correlation between the ritual and secular power of caste groups while diffused political and economic powers result in the rise of more than one caste group into positions of power in some other areas.

20.5   KEYWORDS

Endogamy	It is the custom of marrying within one's own social group such as the caste group.
Hereditary	Anything, like name, status or property, which has been transmitted from one generation to the other genealogically.
Hierarchy	It is one of the most essential aspects of caste stratification in India. It seeks to place one caste above or below another caste on the criteria of ritual purity and pollution.
Hypergamy	The practice of giving a woman in marriage to a clan, which is higher in social status than the status of the clan to which the woman belongs, within the same caste group.
Normative System	It is the body of norms, values, beliefs and ideas, which guide social behaviour in a society.
Permutations	The number of ways in which a social group, like a caste group, can be arranged.
Purity and Pollution	It is an abstract notion which considers certain activities, objects and occupations ritually pure or polluting in the caste society. For example,

vegetarianism is considered ritually purer than non-vegetarianism. Both these concepts are necessarily relative to each other.

Twice-Born   The castes belonging to the first three *varna*, i.e., Brahmans, Kshatriya and Vaishya, whose male members undergo the thread ceremony called the "*Upanayan samskara*" are called the twice-born or '*dvija*'.

20.6   FURTHER READING

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20.7   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Caste is a form of social stratification, which divides the society into various social groups, which are placed in a hierarchical order on the criteria of mainly ritual purity and pollution. It is hereditary and endogamous. It has a traditional association with an occupation and observes maximum commensality.

ii) The main features of caste system are

    a)   hierarchy

    b)   endogamy

    c)   association with a hereditary occupation.

iii) a)   ascribed

    b)   purity, pollution

    c)   *varna*

    d)   caste

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Caste is an ascribed status i.e. its members are born in a caste group. Every person has his or her consanguines and affines in the same caste group since caste is endogamous by nature. Thus, it has been said that the kinship organisation which includes the family, lineage, clan are part of the internal structure of a caste. Thus, caste and kinship are inter-twined with each other.

ii)   In some regions we find that caste might be following ritually purer habits in diet, customs, dress, etc. but still it is placed lower than a caste which follows ritually polluting customs, in the local caste hierarchy. The reasons for this could be secular criteria of wealth and power and so on. For example, in a Mysore village the trader castes who were vegetarians were placed lower than the locally dominant peasant castes who were non-vegetarians.

iii) Dominant caste is that caste which is relatively high in ritual rank and whose members are numerically the strongest in the village/ region and economically and politically most powerful in the area.