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Caste and the Caste System

Caste is a form of social stratification unique to the Indian sub-continent, characterized by hereditary social groups that restrict occupational mobility. It is primarily associated with Hindu society but has influenced other religions as well.

Definition and Historical Context

Caste is determined by birth, with marriage restricted within the group, and prescribes rules about food and social interactions. It is arranged hierarchically based on notions of purity and pollution, with sub-divisions within each caste traditionally linked to specific occupations. The term 'caste' originates from the Portuguese word 'casta', meaning pure breed or group, while Indian terms include 'Varna' and 'Jati'.

Exam Question

Q: What are the defining features of the caste system in India?

A: The caste system is hereditary, endogamous, prescribes rules about food and social interaction, arranged hierarchically based on purity and pollution, has sub-divisions, and is linked to traditional occupations.

Colonial Impact on Caste

The British colonial administration conducted surveys and censuses, such as the 1901 Census under Herbert Risley, which officially categorized castes and reinforced social hierarchies. Land revenue settlements legally recognized upper caste rights. The Government of India Act, 1935, introduced legal categories like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, providing special state recognition.

Exam Question

Q: How did British colonial rule affect the caste system?

A: Colonial rule institutionalized caste identities through censuses and legal recognition, reinforcing social hierarchies and creating official categories like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Post-Independence Developments

Efforts to organize depressed classes began in the late 19th century. Leaders like Ambedkar and Gandhi led anti-untouchability movements, though Gandhi's approach had contradictions. The Indian Constitution abolished caste discrimination, but economic inequalities persisted. Urbanization and industrialization influenced caste dynamics, with caste remaining central in electoral politics. Sociologist M.N. Srinivas introduced concepts like Sanskritisation and Dominant Caste to explain caste mobility and dominance.

Exam Question

Q: What role does caste play in contemporary Indian society?

A: Caste continues to influence social interactions, politics, and economic opportunities, with processes like Sanskritisation and the dominance of certain castes shaping social mobility.

Tribal Communities

Tribes are among the oldest inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent, representing diverse communities often defined by their distinct cultural practices, lack of written religious texts, and absence of formal political structures. According to the 2001 Census, tribes constitute 8.2% of India's population.

Classification of Tribes

Tribes are classified based on permanent traits such as region, language, physical characteristics, and ecological habitat. Most tribal populations live in 'middle India' and the North-Eastern states. Linguistic groups include Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austric, and Tibeto-Burman. Physical-racial classifications include Negrito, Australoid, Mongoloid, Dravidian, and Aryan. Tribes vary in size, with large groups like Gonds and Bhils, and smaller ones like the Andaman Islanders.

Exam Question

Q: How are tribes classified in India?

A: Tribes are classified by region, language, physical traits, ecological habitat, and size, with major linguistic and racial groups identified.

Mainstream Attitudes and Tribal Identity

Colonialism brought changes such as intrusion by money lenders, forest reservations, and mining activities, leading to tribal rebellions. Debates in the 1940s contrasted isolationist

views, advocating protection of tribes, with integrationist views, seeing tribes as backward Hindus. Tribal identity today is shaped by resistance to non-tribal society, achievements like statehood (e.g., Jharkhand), and challenges including limited civil liberties in some states.

Exam Question

Q: What are the main perspectives on tribal integration in India?

A: Isolationists support protecting tribal cultures, while integrationists advocate assimilating tribes into mainstream society.

Family and Kinship

The family is a social group linked by biological or legal ties, serving as a space for care and compassion but also a site of conflict over issues like property and inheritance. Family structures relate to broader social, political, and economic systems and have undergone changes due to migration, war, and changing work patterns.

Types of Families

In India, nuclear and extended families are common. The joint family, often seen as typical of India, is limited to certain communities and regions. Family forms vary by residence (matrilocal, patrilocal), inheritance rules (matrilineal, patrilineal), and authority (patriarchal). There is no evidence of matriarchy; for example, Khasi matriliney passes property control through male relatives.

Kinship

Kinship refers to biological or legal relationships, including blood relations and marital alliances.

Exam Question

Q: What are the main types of family structures in India?

A: The main family types are nuclear families, extended families, and joint families, with variations in residence, inheritance, and authority patterns.

Solved Examples

- **Example 1:** Explain the impact of the 1901 Census on the caste system.
Answer: The 1901 Census officially categorized castes, reinforcing social hierarchies and making caste identities more rigid and visible.
- **Example 2:** Describe the concept of Sanskritisation.
Answer: Sanskritisation is the process by which lower castes adopt the rituals and practices of higher castes to improve their social status.
- **Example 3:** What is the significance of tribal statehood in India?
Answer: Tribal statehood, such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, represents political recognition and empowerment of tribal communities.

Practice Set

Easy

- Define caste and list its key features.
- What is a nuclear family?

Moderate

- Explain the role of British colonialism in shaping the caste system.
- Describe the classification of tribes in India.

Challenging

- Discuss the contradictions in Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability.
- Analyze the impact of urbanization on caste relations in India.

Answer Key

- **Define caste and list its key features.** Caste is a hereditary social group with restricted occupational mobility, endogamy, hierarchical status, and rules about food and social interaction.
- **What is a nuclear family?** A family consisting of one set of parents and their children.
- **Explain the role of British colonialism in shaping the caste system.** British colonialism institutionalized caste identities through censuses and legal recognition, reinforcing social hierarchies.
- **Describe the classification of tribes in India.** Tribes are classified by region, language, physical traits, ecological habitat, and size.
- **Discuss the contradictions in Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability.** Gandhi opposed untouchability but also considered upper caste landowners' interests, leading to contradictory positions.
- **Analyze the impact of urbanization on caste relations in India.** Urbanization created jobs irrespective of caste but also led to caste-segregated social interactions and maintained endogamy.

Quick Reference

- **Caste:** Hereditary social groups with occupational restrictions and hierarchical status.
- **Varna and Jati:** Pan-Indian and region-specific caste classifications.
- **Sanskritisation:** Upward social mobility by imitating higher castes.
- **Tribes:** Indigenous communities with distinct cultures and social structures.
- **Family Types:** Nuclear, extended, joint; vary by residence and inheritance.
- **Kinship:** Biological and legal relationships within families.

Glossary

- **Caste:** A hereditary social group restricting occupational mobility.
- **Endogamy:** Marriage within a specific social group.
- **Hierarchy:** Ranking of social groups based on status.
- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes:** Official categories for disadvantaged groups recognized by the Indian Constitution.
- **Sanskritisation:** Process of adopting higher caste practices for social mobility.
- **Tribe:** Indigenous community with distinct cultural and social traits.
- **Kinship:** Relationships based on blood or marriage.
- **Nuclear Family:** Family consisting of parents and their children.
- **Extended Family:** Family including multiple generations or couples living together.

Time Period / Year	Event / Change	Importance
Late Vedic Period (900-500 BC)	Caste system was not rigid	Early formation of caste features
1901	British Census under Herbert Risley	Official categorization and reinforcement of caste hierarchy
1935	Government of India Act	Legal recognition of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
Post-Independence	Constitution abolishes caste discrimination	Legal framework for equality, but economic inequalities persist
1960s-1970s	Debates on tribal identity and integration	Shaped policies and perceptions of tribal communities
2000s	Formation of tribal states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh	Political empowerment of tribal communities