



Impact of Power Structure of Rural Society on Caste System: A Sociological Study

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Abstract The caste system has been the main basis of power forms in Indian rural society. From the traditional forms of power to the present forms, the dominant castes of the rural society have played an important role. The political, economic and social conditions of the rural society are determined by the caste system there. Despite changes in the forms of power in Indian society, caste and class still exist. Caste plays an important role in the position, prestige and functioning of every member of the society. Although in the present era, class consciousness has had an influence on the social system of rural society, but the feeling of casteism is still present in the rural power system.

Keywords Caste System, Rural Society, Political, Economic, Social

Introduction

Caste system has been an important institution of Indian rural society. It is considered to be the determinant of a person's daily routine as well as political, social and economic activities.

Rajni Kothri has accepted the caste system as an important factor in Indian politics [1].

According to Desai, the influence of caste is important in the political life of rural areas because there is more awareness about caste among the village people [2].

At present, as a result of democratization and modernization, the importance of caste is decreasing, however, caste is still considered an important factor in rural areas. Although in ancient times the pace of change in this system was slow, but in the present times, due to education, urbanization, migration etc. the change in caste based power structure has intensified. Due to changes in caste, class, religion etc. in the rural social system, there has been a change in the forms of power structure.

In ancient times, the Indian rural community was divided on the basis of caste and class. The rights and duties of people were determined on the basis of caste and class in the society. The members of upper castes and classes had monopoly over the entire society. Members of lower castes and classes had to accept subordination to people of higher castes and classes.

In the Indian rural social system, control of community power was in the hands of caste. It was mandatory for every member of the caste to follow the rules made by the castes. Those members of the caste who prepared the code of conduct were close to the landlords, hence they used to prepare the structure of community power as per their wish so that the members of the lower and exploited castes could come under their clutches in every way. Formally, the responsibility of running Gram Panchayats was given to more and more old, rich and experienced people of the caste. Along with this, after the death of the head of a respected caste and family, the responsibility was given to another senior member of the same caste and family. Hence, it is clear that the socially capable, economically prosperous and politically awakened caste controlled the power structure through its influence.



Society

Society is considered to be a group of individuals who have a common culture. The people of this group live in a certain area and feel themselves bound by some different bonds as a separate organized unit [3]. The system of mutual relationships found among individuals is called society.

According to MacIver and Page – Society is a system of customs, procedures, rights and mutual cooperation, many groups and their departments, control and freedom on human behavior. This ever-changing complex system is called society, that is, society is a web of social relations which is always changing.

MacIver and Page have stated three essential conditions for social relations-

- (i) People should be aware of each other.
- (ii) They have meaningful behaviour.
- (iii) They are influenced by each other's behaviour.

That is, the web of social relations in which people interact with each other and become bound is called society [4].

According to Giddings – Society itself is an association, an organization, a combination of formal relationships in which the people who cooperate are connected through mutual relations [5].

According to Talcott Parsons, society has been defined as the complete complexity of those human relationships which have arisen by performing activities in the form of means-end relationships, whether it is real or symbolic [6].

Rural

The word rural means an area where agriculture acts as the backbone of that area and agriculture is the main means of livelihood for most of the population in that area, that is, rural means those people who are directly related to nature. And the primary production of goods is done with the help of nature.

Landis has given special importance to three elements for the analysis of the word rural, that is, only that group can be called rural which -

- (i) Be directly dependent on nature.
- (ii) Which is limited in size.
- (iii) Whose members have close and primary relationship.

"Rural word consists of the totality of cultivators and their families having direct relationship of nature and chief occupation is agriculture" [7].

The word rural connotes a characteristic which includes dependence on nature, agricultural work, closeness in relationships and small size, etc.

Rural Society

Rural society has existed in every part of the world. Rural society has played an important role in the development of human civilization. In the initial stage of development of civilization, man did not have much knowledge of agriculture and agricultural works, but with time, man acquired knowledge of agriculture and developed it, as a result of which people stopped wandering here and there for sources of food and started living a permanent life. They started living in a particular place and this is where villages were born and the groups of these villages were named rural societies.

“The rural society basically does agriculture on many cultivable lands, divides the plain lands among themselves, grazes the animals on the surrounding waste and barren lands and claims its rights up to the boundaries of the nearby communities” [8].

According to D. Sanderson - 'A rural community is that form of association which is found among the people and their institutions in a local area, in which they live in huts on scattered farms and in villages which are often the center of their common activities. It happens [9].

According to Encyclopedia of Social Sciences - A nuclear family is a group of related or unrelated people who live in a large house or in several places of residence, are bound by close relationships and basically do farming jointly on cultivable land. Yes, such a society is called rural society [10].



Thus, it is clear that qualities like predominance of agricultural work, closeness to nature, multiplicity of primary relationships, social homogeneity, lack of mobility, general agreement in behavior are present in rural society.

Caste System

The word caste is the Hindi version of the English word caste. This word was first used by Gracia de Orta in 1563 AD. According to him, people do not change their ancestral occupation.

Abbé Dubois, while using the word caste, said that the word caste has been used in Europe to express a clan and class.

a R. Wadia is of the opinion that the word cast is similar to the Latin word castus which means pure species or breed.

Thus, the word caste is derived from the Latin word 'casta' which means complete with racial elements, race or ancestral qualities. The word caste is derived from the Sanskrit word 'jana' which means to be born. From this point of view, caste means things having similar qualities by birth.

According to Ridgley - It is a family or a collection of several families given a common name which traces its origin from some imaginary man or god and acknowledges the ancestral occupation and is a cognate to those who can consider it. Is evident as a group [11].

According to MacIver and Page - When the status of a person is completely predetermined, that is, when a person is not born with the expectation of any change in his status, then class becomes clear in the form of caste [12].

According to Cooley – When any class is completely based on inheritance then it is called caste [13].

Under the caste system, the rights given to the upper castes of the rural society started being used inappropriately that the Scheduled Caste people had become a symbol of exploitation. Exploitation was not so bad for the rural social system in the era of monarchy and feudalism, but in the era of democracy, secularism and socialism, it does not seem fair and rational. The entire stability of the caste system was based on three rules, mainly the rules of marriage, food and social interaction. In rural society, endogamy, elite marriage and matrimonial rules are still strictly followed.

In the caste system, the beliefs regarding purity and impurity related to occupation have started changing. The entire structure and stratification of the caste system on occupational basis has now completely ended.

Origin of Caste System

Caste is considered a complex institution in the Indian social system. With the aim of developing understanding of the origin and structures of the caste system, studies were done from different perspectives. European and Indian scholars studied in this context from Vedas, epics, Puranas, etc. According to Rigveda, four castes are believed to have originated from the four parts of Brahma. Nesfield considered profession as the basis of the origin of caste, whereas Risley considered racial difference and Hocart considered religion as the reason for the origin of the caste system.

Ideas related to traditional religious sources regarding the origin of the caste system have been presented in Hindu religious texts. In these, the origin of caste has been linked with supernatural powers or beliefs. Castes were traditionally formed through the interpretation of religious texts like Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Geeta, Manusmriti.

Thinkers like Nesfield, Dahlman and Balant explained the origin of the caste system on occupational basis. According to him, in the beginning every member of the society had the freedom to choose his work. One who did whatever work he did, became adept in that work over time and turned the business into a hereditary profession and this hereditary business turned into a caste.

According to Dahlman, the fundamental divisions in the social system or those whose occupations were religious, political and economic respectively and this occupational unionism transformed into a caste form and this occupational knowledge started being passed on from father to son.

Blunt considered occupational basis important in the origin of caste. The origin of caste system is related to the situation of occupational division arising in a class based society.



According to Hocart, the origin of caste system is related to religious activities and rituals. The traditions related to these rituals are divided into various high and low caste levels on the basis of purity and impurity. For each activity, special persons are required like priest, barber, gardener, Kahar, etc. The people performing all these tasks became the status which started being transferred hereditarily from one generation to the next.

According to Sonart, while presenting the views on food, co-habitation and social restrictions, the origin of the caste system is based on the worship of the family deity and the difference in prohibitions related to food in the family.

Rural Caste System

The caste system has been the main basis of the social structure of rural society. Caste is considered to be a social group based on birth which determines the status of a person in rural societies on hereditary basis by following the rules of endogamy and some prohibitions on social cohabitation.

Castes have been the main center of power in Indian rural society, which currently exists with changes. Every person of the society is a member of some caste or community in which he automatically gets a position and place in the society. According to the same position and place, a person's working system, profession, facilities received in the society, inconveniences, family, social life, religious and cultural norms, property rights, etc. are determined.

The feeling of casteism still exists in the rural society, but class consciousness has had an impact on the rural social system.

In the rural social system, caste is the medium of power from where people expect help and support. Most of the villagers consider caste support necessary to make themselves influential and successful. Although in the present times there has been a decline in inter-caste trust due to selfish attitudes, still mutual trust is found to be more among the auto-caste people as compared to other castes.

In rural society, caste determines the form of education and the attitude of the members of the society towards education. Even after so many years of independence, in the present times the Brahmin castes in rural societies consider it important to give religious education to their children. While the rest of the castes, including the farming castes, do not have agricultural knowledge, despite many provisions in the Scheduled Castes, instead of schooling, the artisanal castes try to make their children skilled in handicrafts along with schooling.

In rural society, education is not evaluated on the basis of personality development and social progress but on the basis of caste traditions.

Thus, it is clear that in rural social system, on the basis of caste system, along with rural unemployment, each caste group gets help in acquiring skills in special professional knowledge.

The caste system directly affects the political structures in rural society. In Indian rural societies, the rules set by caste are followed not for the purpose of religious stability but as a form of decentralization of political power on the basis of caste classification.

In rural societies, caste system influences the political system more than in urban societies. Caste consciousness is still highly developed among the villagers that at the time of elections, decisions regarding selection of candidates and voting are taken on the basis of caste. Thus, caste has been a social institution as well as a political institution since its initial form. Although the process of caste polarization is flawed in a democratic system, members of one caste organize themselves and protect their interests with the aim of awakening each other's consciousness about their rights.

The caste system has played an important role in determining the leadership of rural society. Once a particular caste group gets the opportunity of leadership in the society, that caste group tries to maintain power as the dominant caste for a long time. In the rural social system, this leadership is vested in the head of the village who is considered to be related to the upper castes present in the village. The lower castes of the village remain under the control of the upper castes while remaining subject to the traditional rules of the caste system. For this reason, the lower castes could not develop their own leadership so that they could provide guidance to the upper castes.



In the present era, caste groups have started changing into different units in the rural society, but the upper caste groups are formed as independent units, while the development of leadership of the lower caste group is controlled by the leader of some other caste.

In rural societies, the caste system is not discriminatory and disruptive but tries to make the caste groups supportive and complementary to each other.

In this context, M.N. Srinivas said that castes in rural societies have the qualities of interdependence and complementarity [14].

In rural social organizations, division is not found between castes but between regional units of the village. In the rural caste system, such relationships of dominance and subordination develop which fulfill the needs of the members of the rural society.

Jajmani system is an important aspect in the caste system of rural society which is completely caste based. Under the Jajmani system, different castes are linked to each other through exchange of services in such a way that the entire rural system can be integrated as a unit. The Jajmani system made self-reliance permanent in the rural society for a long time.

Caste organizations have played an important role in perpetuating the caste system in the rural societies of India. Caste Panchayats and caste unions used to prevent members from violating caste rules by threatening them with caste exclusion, caste feast, financial punishment, etc., but at present the existence of these caste based organizations is gradually coming to an end. Also the disintegration of caste panchayats ended the caste system and made it baseless.

The untouchability prevalent in the rural society is considered to be the result of the caste system because the caste system has developed evils like untouchability, beliefs of karma and reincarnation. Today, as a result of the constitutional provisions, the Scheduled Castes advocated for equal rights, which led to the conflict between the upper castes and the Scheduled Castes. As a result of this violent conflict, mutual hatred, animosity, violence and factionalism in the rural social environment ended the simplicity, harmony and purity of rural life.

There is a close relationship between caste and religion in rural society, lifestyle in rural societies develops according to the resources and traditions present there, if the folk beliefs and religious beliefs prevalent in the society become weak due to lack of resources and traditions, then personal and Social problems increase as a result of which social disintegration begins. Therefore, caste system plays an important role in providing protection to these religious beliefs and maintaining their influence.

The rules of caste control its members through the limits of lineage and region. Through these rules a person is forced to behave in accordance with local religious practices. The caste system contributes to maintaining religious stability by making religious rituals mandatory for each ethnic group.

The political aspect of caste system exists in the form of caste panchayat in Indian rural society. In rural societies, caste panchayat acts as a power that determines the behavior of caste members within a particular area and punishes those who violate caste rules. In this way, executive and judicial powers are included in the caste panchayat, similar to that of the state. In Indian rural societies, every caste has had its own caste panchayats since ancient times and the objective of every caste panchayat is to strengthen the spirit of working according to the rules of caste among the members of their caste.

Today, due to the impact of industrialization and education, the influence of caste panchayats is rapidly decreasing in urban areas, but in rural societies, caste panchayat is functioning as a powerful social and political unit.

Prabhu Caste

Prabhu caste is a concept that provides a new perspective to the rural social structure, which clarifies the new form of structural change related to the caste system. M.N. Srinivas first presented this concept in his study of Rampura village in Mysore in 1959. M.N. According to Srinivas, a caste is called dominant caste when it is numerically powerful in a village or local area and exercises its influence economically and politically. That is, a caste is called a dominant caste only when the members of that caste are so large in number that they can exercise dominance over other castes in the village and can act as an effective economic and political unit. If the



position of such a large and powerful caste group is not very low in the entire caste system, then it easily transforms into a dominant caste.

Srinivas has mentioned the following characteristics found in Indian rural societies on the basis of which a caste can be called dominant caste-

- (i) Ownership of a large portion of the available local agricultural land.
- (ii) The number of members of the caste should be sufficient.
- (iii) On the basis of local caste stratification, that caste is in a comparatively higher position [15].

Power Structure

The ability to dominate human beings, to intimidate and control them, to make them obey orders, to interfere in their freedoms and to force them to turn their behavior in a specific direction is called power.

There are some members or groups in the society who, due to their special qualities and abilities, have such ability that they can use it in special circumstances. This type of influence pattern in the society creates a structure. The individuals or groups who have influence in the society formally and informally create the power structure in the society.

Power

Power means the ability to control and direct the behavior of people or things. The power structure of the society keeps the members and organizational units of the society controlled and dynamic. Obviously, power plays an important role in keeping the process dynamic by bringing about positive development in the social system and in providing stability to the systemic units.

While discussing the power structure of the community, Hunter made it clear that the center of power lies in the role of those who lead the community [16].

Power is used to fulfill unanimously accepted programs. The use of capacity to accomplish work is based on acceptance. In case of prohibitive use, capacity becomes a barrier.

In fact, the social power structure and essentially the emergence of power is the result of those specific conditions of social relations in which unequal distribution of powers of production is embedded. The purpose of the powers that production relations create in their operational conditions is to maintain the specific dominance of a particular class or individual. Social power is directly related to social stratification. When reference is made to the powerless, it is clear that it indicates the lowest level of the class structure of the society, the poor, the helpless, the uneducated. In most social contexts, social power is positioned as an essential element useful in the strategy to achieve political and economic objectives.

Social power lies in individuals or groups. Three major variables appear to be involved in group power. Firstly, the number of people in it, secondly the organization which creates the process of putting power into practice and thirdly the resources that the group has. The appropriate three create power within their limits according to their respective capacities.

In Indian rural society, the status of a person has been determined on the basis of social power since the beginning. It is true that traditionally, given status was more important than acquired status in determining social power, but still this institutional form of power has been influencing the rural lifestyle of India for a long time.

Impact of Caste System on Rural Power Structure

Castes have been the main center of power in Indian rural society, which exists today with some changes. Every person in India is first of all a member of a caste or community, according to which he automatically gets a place and position in the society. According to the same position and status, the limits are determined up to his working method, profession, position, facilities received in the society, inconveniences, family, social life, religious and cultural norms, rights over property, etc. The feeling of casteism is still intact in the rural society, but class consciousness has had an impact on the economic, social and political lifestyle of the rural society.

According to Dr. Gadgil, this situation will persist in the rural society as long as the upper caste groups have land in their hands and the lower caste groups are resourceless [17].



The present day rural power structure is based on democratic patterns, but keeping in mind the voting rights, the caste system exists in a strong position in the rural societies, the importance of the majority caste group has increased.

According to Dr. Majumdar – In rural society, powerful castes are not always numerically powerful. A few families of some other castes, who own land and have relations with good people, become powerful in the rural society [18].

Even after the change in the traditional rights of power in the caste system of rural society, the upper castes are trying to protect those rights and the division of different castes today no longer exists as a cultural institution but has transformed into the form of political pressure groups. The above situation has given rise to new trends in rural societies. Caste related division is being done not as a means to achieve religious and cultural goals in the society but to fulfill political and economic interests. In the context of caste system of rural society, power is not determined traditionally but on the basis of majority and minority. Due to the increase in the political importance of the caste which has the largest number of members in the rural society, the pressure on other castes is clearly visible. Apart from this, new power centers have been formed in rural societies which are purely political and have no connection with religion and caste system.

Conclusion

From the analysis of power structure based on caste system of Indian rural society, it is clear that among the power determinants of rural society, caste is still the main basis of social stratification, but its functions and structure have changed but due to continuity and variability of rural power structure. The caste system has played an important role in maintaining it. Through its traditional characteristics, the caste system has maintained the continuity of rural life, while by adopting many changing elements, it has given a new form to the power structure.

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