

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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G. S. Ghurye: Features of Caste

Welcome back to the class. In this class, we are going to discuss one of the very famous essays of G. S. Ghurye.

And you remember in the previous class, we had a discussion about his life, his major theoretical orientations, the kind of ideological as well as theoretical orientations that he represented and some of the methodological positions he adopted. We had a kind of detailed discussion by following Professor Carol Upadhyaya's essay. And in this class, I thought I will discuss one of his original essay titled The Features of Caste System.

And this essay has been widely used and widely quoted to teach sociology across universities both in India as well as elsewhere. And this essay is taken from his book Caste and Race in India. And it is a, I am using a section of that or an excerpt from the book which is available in a book titled Social Stratification edited by Professor Deepankar Gupta. And this book also is very, very popular, very useful book for students of sociology. It has very elaborate discussions on stratification.

And so, this particular essay is taken from that book. We will get to that essay. So, as I mentioned, this is the essay Features of the Caste System, G. S. Ghurye.

It is taken from his very famous work Caste and Race in India published in 1969 by popular pragash in Bombay. So, this lists some six features of caste which are maybe with very elaborate, with very detailed discussion under each of these features, each of these characteristics. And they involve quite lot of details from different context of the country, from different parts of the country, from different geographical and linguistic and regional locations of the country. So, it actually provides you with the kind of complexity of each of these features that we are talking about. Given the complexity of caste system as a whole, given the heterogeneous and historically constituted nature of caste system in India, it is very difficult to define what exactly caste system is or to list out its major features without any ambiguity.

But Ghurye has tried for that and that is this particular essay. So, he says, a foreign

visitor is stuck by phenomenon known as the caste system. He may not understand full working of the system, but he is aware of the fact that Hindu society is divided into groups known as caste with varying degrees of respectability and circles of social intercourse. This is due not only to the fact that caste is the most general form of social organization in India, but also because it presents such a marked contrast under the social grouping prevalent in Europe or America. Something very unique, I think maybe the single most thing that attracted all of the foreign scholars towards India was this phenomenon called as caste.

And there are very fascinating debates about it, whether Indian society had the kind of caste system or was it kind of a invented and created as a system during colonial rule. There are quite a lot of discussions and debates about it, but every traveler of the medieval period or the early period or the ancient period was stuck by the prevalence of this particular system. Owing two features, the ubiquity and strangeness. The institution has found many able scholars devoted to its study. With all the labours of the studies, however, we do not possess a real general definition of caste.

That is a very interesting thing. Maybe there is a very few people have attempted to provide a definition of caste. You know, Dumont has tried to give a definition of caste. Deepangar Gupta tried to give a definition of caste, but any attempt to provide a very clear definition of caste is bound to fail because it is such a ambiguous and such a complex phenomenon. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon.

On the other hand, much literature on the subject is marred by a lack of precision about the use of the term. Hence, I propose to give a description of the factors underlying the system of caste. So, that is his argument. Now, the first one, as you know, these are excerpts from his book. So, they are selectively taken by Professor Deepangar Gupta who edited this work.

The first one is the segmental division of society, and this is a very fundamental feature of caste system. A caste system represents a segmental division of society. It actually presents you with a society which already divided or already grouped into different very distinct segments. These segments are very, very, very well defined with very clear demarcations with a host of social and cultural practices that reinforce their boundaries. So, it is a very, very well-defined system of segmental division of society.

It is not a society where everybody is seen as same. It is a society, it is a system where the differences on the basis of birth, on the basis of belonging to particular caste or sub-caste followed by a set of ritual and social and cultural practices which reinforce this

uniqueness is prevalent in the society. So, caste groups, caste groups, caste were groups with a well-developed life of their own. The membership were of unlike that of the voluntary associations and that of a class were determined not by selection but by birth. I think it is a, it is a, it is a commonsensical knowledge that caste is you are born into a caste.

It is an ascribed status. You are born into a caste, and you live in a caste, and you die in a caste. It is almost impossible for you to escape the caste because it is not something that you cannot escape out of. It is not something that you can change that caste identity. The status of a person dependent not on his wealth as in the classes of modern Europe but on traditional importance of the caste in which he had the luck of being born.

To restrict myself to Marathi region, a person is born either a Brahmin, Prabhu, Maratha, Vani, Sonar, Suthar. So, he says that every geographic region, every region in India has a distinct set of or distinct names of caste that populate that particular region and these names change when you go to another geographic region. These names change when you go to another geographic or even or linguistic region. So, it presents a very, very complicated system. So, the most important one is that this caste, especially traditionally, they worked as a very singular unit, a kind of a more or less autonomous units in each of these geographic regions.

So, he gives a list of how there was a kind of autonomy or a kind of a governance of their own systems within each of these regions. So, he gives a list of the so-called crimes or so-called deviations that were dealt with by the caste. For example, some of the offences dealt with by it were eating, drinking, or having similar dealing with a caste or sub-caste. So, inter-dining was prohibited. A member of a particular caste is not supposed to eat from the hands of a person belonging to that, belonging to some other caste except in certain specific conditions.

So, there were a series of offences, series of things that were not supposed to be done and if they were violated, each caste had its own council, you know, with its appalling, with its appellate authorities. So, each caste had its own systems of convening and then discussing and then handing out a kind of punishment. So, for example, he says that citizens owed moral allegiance to the caste first rather than the community as a whole. By segmental division, I wish to connote this aspect as a system.

Let us read it again. This means that in this caste bound society, the amount of community feeling must have been restricted and that the citizens owed moral allegiance to their caste first rather than to the community as a whole. By segmental division, I wish to connote this aspect of the system. The punishment that these councils awarded were

out-casting. Out-casting was seen as one of the most severest form of punishments where a person is thrown out of the caste so that he or she will not have absolutely any relationship or social interaction with the members of the particular caste. Or either temporary or permanent, it could be temporary or permanent or imposing of fines or you know, hosting a feast as a form of punishment.

Feast to be given to the caste men, corporal punishment and sometimes religious expiation. So, these are the kind of punishments that were given by the caste councils to its own members who are seen as you know, crossing the limit or committing some kind of crimes or committing or violating kind of a social norm. So, historically, in this society, Ghurye would argue that it was composed of communities that were mostly identified around their caste and sub-caste. So, that is the argument that this segmental division of society continued to be one of the most important features. And all these details I am not going into the details, you can read that it gives a very, very broad picture about the kind of, very broad and very detailed picture about the complexity of caste arrangement, caste nomenclature, caste names in different geographical parts of the country.

Then, second point he discusses is the question of hierarchy. Hierarchy is again, we know the idea of hierarchy is that arrangement of different strata into with the notions of superiority and inferiority. So, this he says is almost a very central category of caste system that almost throughout Indian subcontinent, people have a general understanding about who occupies the higher most position and who occupies the lowermost position of this vertical hierarchy. So, there could be disagreements about maybe in the middle region, who comes above that, but in the extremes and this is the point which is being attributed by almost everybody. In the extremes of this, the topmost position of the caste hierarchy and the lowermost, for example, if you consider this as the caste hierarchy, in the lowermost position and the bottom and the higher and the topmost position, it is more or less clear that who occupies that.

So, across India, the Brahmins are considered to be the people who occupy the topmost position of caste hierarchy and at the bottom are occupied by the people who are considered to be the present day Dalits or the untouchables, who are doing supposedly some of the most menial jobs, of manual scavenging or working on hides or working on leather or removing dead animals and other things. So, this particular understanding of hierarchy as being vertically arranged and with absolute clarity on both the extremes is a very important feature of caste. And in between, there is consensus, but the middle region you will find quite a lot of lack of consensus about who exactly occupies others. So, almost every caste has the story of looking up or looking down upon somebody and then looking up somebody with the kind of respect, or saying that we are above

somebody, but we are below somebody else as well. So, this kind of a relative sense of inferiority and superiority is a very important feature of caste system in India.

So, everywhere in India, there is a definite scheme of social precedence among the caste with the Brahmin at the head of the hierarchy. Only in South India, the artist castes he gives example of some South Indian caste where the Kammalas who claim to be superior to Brahmins, but they are quite exceptions. So, these are explanations, but this is the point that the following observation vividly brings out the state of things. As a society now stands, the place due to each community is not easily distinguishable, nor is any common principle of precedence recognized by the people themselves by which to grade the caste. Excepting the Brahmins at one end and admittedly degraded caste like Holayas and others, the members of a large proportion of intermediate castes think or profess to think their caste is better than the neighbors and should be ranked accordingly.

So, this is again a very interesting thing that every caste would have a set of arguments or belief systems or legends which they think, which make them suitable for a higher position. So, there is always a claim to be superior to some other caste. So, that is the second important point associated with hierarchy. Third point is again a very fundamental point is about restrictions on feeding and social intercourses. So, caste system is not only a segmental vision of labor, it is not only hierarchy, but this hierarchy is maintained.

This notion of superiority, inferiority these notions of distinctiveness, this notions of very strong boundaries, very solid boundaries, very rigid boundaries were maintained by a series of social practices and cultural practices. And one of the most important one among them is the restrictions of feeding and social intercourse. A caste system typically does not allow you to take food from any other person indiscriminately. There are very well-defined rules about from whom you can accept food and water and again within food what kind of food.

So, it is very interesting. In Hindustan proper caste can be divided into five groups. First the twice born caste, twice born caste are known as the Dwijas, the people who undergo the sacred thread ceremony because the sacred thread is a ceremony seen as a second birth or mostly the first three, you know, Varnas, the Brahmin, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are the group which undergo this particular twice born ceremony. So, the first twice born caste, second those caste at whose hands twice born can take Pakka food and we will see what Pakka is and what is Kacha food. Third those caste at whose hands the twice born cannot accept any kind of food but may take water. Fourth caste that are not untouchables yet are such that water from them cannot be used by the twice born.

Last comes all these castes whose touch defiles not only the twice born but any

orthodoxian. So, there are very specific rules about who are the people from whom this twice born caste can take, can take only water not, you know, any form of food or the caste from where they can take Pakka food and then finally the group from whom food cannot be taken by any caste and they are the kind of untouchables. All food is divided into two class Kacha and Pakka and the former being any food in the cooking of which water has been used and the latter all food cooked in ghee without the addition of water. So, this is a very again a very very interesting central, you know, concept that the Kacha food is food prepared with water and that is supposedly more, you know, sensitive in terms of purity and pollution. So, an upper caste person is not allowed to take Kacha food even from people who are just below them.

But they might be allowed to take Pakka food, which is prepared out of ghee because, you know, because the other argument, because it is considered to be less contaminating. So, there are very strict rules about who can take what kind of food from whom. So, there are, you know, these are all elaborations about that. He talks about kind of different kinds of examples, different kind of local variations, different kind of, you know, differences in that. But the argument is that if and it becomes very difficult to give a kind of a very general argument because unless you look into the specific history of your own region, unless you look into the specific history of your own cultural region, then it will look very very vague.

But every geographic region, every cultural region has the very specific rules and regulations about how this intercourse and then, you know, exchange of food was regulated. Then he talks about other kind of social interaction. He talks about one of the most notorious case in Kerala where people becoming defiled or people becoming polluted even by the distance, not only with the touch because untouchably as you know it is a, it was an integral part of caste system and anybody from an upper caste would be defiled, would be polluted with the touch of a lower caste person. But in Kerala, in pre-modern Kerala, it was not, even the touch was not required, a kind of a particular physical proximity was, you know, sufficient to pollute somebody or to defile somebody. So, there are very elaborate rules and how this different caste must maintain, you know, distance from one another and these are very very vivid explanations.

For example, he says among the people of Kerala, a Nair may approach a Nambudri Brahmin but must not touch him. While a Tiyya must keep himself the distance of 36 steps from the Brahmin and a Pulayan must not approach him within 96 paces. So, a Pulayan is the present Dalit category, belongs to present day Dalit category, scheduled caste category. So, they were supposed to be away for at least 96 feet away. A Tiyya must keep away from a Nair at 12 paces while some caste may approach the Tiyya though they must not touch him.

A Pulayan must not come near to any Hindu caste. So, rigid are the rules about defilement, which is supposed to be carried out, carried with them by all except the Brahmin that the latter will not perform even the ablutions within the presence of a shudra habitation. So, these are some of the very important observations about how these rules and restrictions about social intercourse were enforced in the caste society. The third point or the next point is, I think the fourth point is the civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections. So, caste system also comes with a set of privileges and a set of disabilities attached with different caste and this is very, very, very interesting and what is more important is not only how these disabilities and privileges were organized and arranged but what have been the effect, what have been the consequences of these disabilities and then privileges over the last two millennia. That is the most central question to a sociologist or that is the most central question to somebody who is interested in the study of caste now.

It is not only that the system exists but what has, what have been the implications, what have been the results of the centuries old systems of giving certain privileges, certain civil and religious privileges to certain caste and inflicting certain civil and religious disabilities to other castes. Segregation of individual caste or the groups of caste in a village is the most obvious mark of his civil and religious disabilities. So, he elaborates how in every village especially in all over India, the housing pattern of houses were segregated. They all lived in one particular group and in particular locality and mostly the Dalits would be outside the village and their access to road would be compromised compared to others and their access to common grace land would be limited and their access to common well would be prohibited and they would not be allowed to come to the main temple or the village temple. So, there were series of restrictions imposed on caste and if you look into the temple entry, the whole argument that a Hindu temple must be open to every Hindu.

If you look into that particular debate itself, the kind of a struggles, the kind of an agitation, the kind of a movements that this particular demand has created, that is a very, very fascinating story. For a long time, the temples were out of bound for the people who are considered to be the lowest and it was only through a series of agitations and movements that our history will show that this right temple entry was proclaimed and many state governments had to really make it as law in spite of the opposition, very fierce opposition to the upper caste people. So, there are quite a lot of illustrations. I am not going into the details. Very, very, very, it is important, it is worthwhile to read each of these illustrations, maybe this particular section.

In the Dravidian India, the disabilities of the lower caste went so far as to prescribe what

sort of houses they should build and what material they might employ in the construction thereof. The Shanans and the Izhava, Todi Tappers of the eastern and western coast were not allowed to build houses above one story in height. In Malabar, the house is called by different names according to the occupant's caste and in Malabar you had different names for your own house, names for food, names for almost everything there was very, very different set of terminologies used. For example, food among the Brahmins would be described with a particular set of terminology and this terminology cannot be used by the lower caste person to indicate food. Similarly, house, that the Malayalam word house cannot be, it is not a common name for different caste.

So, the name that is used by the lower caste must indicate its lowliness. They cannot use the kind of a high-sounding caste, high sounding name for indicating their houses as if it looks like that of the upper caste. So, members of all castes except the Brahmins were expressly forbidden to cover the upper part of their body above their waist. So, there are lot of stories about how there were very stringent regulations, very stringent regulations even on the dressing pattern and this very famous, the Shanar riot in Travancore, in erstwhile Travancore is very, very famous about that when women revolted against this particular rule that they have, they do not have the right to cover their breasts. So, there are quite a lot of illustrations and I think you must go through that.

And the next point, the fifth point is the lack of unrestricted choice of occupation. This is another very important feature of caste system which according to Ghurye is the lack of unrestricted choice of occupation. So, caste system has very specific prescriptions about who can do what kind of work. There are a series of, a set of jobs were seen as hereditary occupations and these hereditary occupations with very specific sense of purity and pollution attached with that and they were to be done by the members of that particular caste alone, that particular group alone.

Others were not allowed to do that. So, that is why he is talking about lack of unrestricted choice of occupation. And the best example is that of the priesthood. Who can become a priest? And priests used to be, or it used to be the monopoly of the Brahmins because Brahmins have been the priests historically. So, other caste people were explicitly forbidden from becoming the priest and I hope you are aware about the kind of debates that are going on even now. Whether the known Brahmins can be appointed as the priest in some of the very important temples and whether the state is taking, state government is taking initiative, there is opposition towards that.

So, there are quite a lot of discussions and debates about what kind of work one can do. And more importantly, more importantly is that certain jobs which are considered to be the menial, the most menial, the most dehumanizing jobs. For example, the human

scavenging, the manual scavenging, the human beings removing the excreta of other people, it was given to, or it was supposedly the job of a particular caste who are born into that. Or the responsibility of removing the dead animals from somebody's house or to work on the leather. So, this caste who work on the leather, the caste who work on dead animals, it was considered to be the most defiling job, the most polluting job.

And they were also not allowed to take up anything that is devoid of this kind of pollution. So, the traditional occupation, traditional arrangement was that the artisan caste would continue with their kind of artisanal skills and a man who is born into a washerman family would traditionally continue with that. And the most important point is that each of these jobs, especially towards the lower part of the caste hierarchy comes with very specific set of ideas of pollution and purity. And most of this service caste had a sense of inferiority associated with that, notions of pollution associated with that and that permanently you know made their job polluting. So, generations after generations of people who are born into this particular caste continue to be lower by its definition.

Because this particular restriction does not allow you to leave the place, to leave this particular job. And the more a polluting job you do, for example, the washerman's job or a washerwoman's job, that is considered to be highly polluting because a washerman or a woman is supposed to wash very soiled clothes, clothes that are used at the time of menstruation, so clothes that are used at the time of childbirth or soiled clothes of upper caste people. So, by engaging in this kind of a polluting job every day, day in and day out, they are actually accumulating more and more pollution and they are not able to come out of that unless they stop that particular kind of activity. So, this is some very important argument in this thing, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation. And the most important and maybe the most central feature of caste system which even now continues or which actually function as the pivot around which the caste system revolves around now is the restrictions on marriage.

Which is again, I do not need to explain that, that it is not, it does not really work at the level of caste, but mostly work at the realm of sub-caste. Every sub-caste will have a caste endogamy, a person is supposed to get married only within the sub-caste and of course there are rules of exogamy and endogamy work within that on the basis of Gotra and other things. But this continues to be one of the most primary feature of caste system. And even now, there is a statistic that in India it is only around 5 percentage of the marriages are taking place as inter-caste marriages and all rest of the marriages are happening within the caste. So, and also, we hear the horror stories of honor killing or revenge killing when a man or woman decide to get married against the wishes of their family members.

So, it continues as a very interesting phenomenon and the perpetuation of this particular practice irrespective of or in spite of the educational advancement or economic advancement is a very interesting phenomenon. Why that people prefer to stick on with this particular kind of a fascination or obsession with getting married into one's own sub-caste. Even though they are modern in many sense, even though they are quite educated in many sense, it actually tells you something very interesting about how the society function in India. So, these are the, I am not going into the details because you can read this again, very very elaborate descriptions about that.

So, these are the 6 features that G.S. Ghurye talk about the features of caste system. And with lot of local variations, we know that these are the important features that define caste system and of course, quite a lot of features have lost its significance, maybe except the case of the endogamy. Lot many other features have lost its significance, I am not saying that completely disappeared, but they have lost their earlier rigor and the vigor with which they were implemented. To sum up, in each linguistic area, there were about 200 groups called caste with distinct names, births in one of which usually determines the status and society of a given individual, which were divided into about 2000 smaller units generally known as sub-caste, fixing the limits of marriage and effective social life and making of specific cultural tradition. These major groups were held together by the possession with a few exceptions of a common priesthood.

There were a sort of overall counting which grouped all of them into 5 or 6 classes overtly expressed or tactically, tacitly understood. So, these are the, these are the, this essay, Features of Caste System, Features of the Caste System, excerpts taken from Ghurye's work, the book titled Caste and Race in India. As I mentioned earlier, it is considered to be a classic essay, taught widely as it kind of summarizes the most important features of caste system and quite a lot of subsequent literature or even empirical studies or theoretical arguments were built around these observations of Ghurye because they present the essence of caste system or the way in which it was enacted in Indian society in a very coherent and systematic manner. So, we will stop here, and we will continue with the class in the next class. Thank you.