

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week6 Lecture 34
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! Welcome to this lecture that is part of the module titled The Fractured Identity of Nation. In this section we will primarily focus on the historical aspect of how nation-building was not just a struggle against the British colonisers. Even within the nation, the differences based on caste and religion, created a crisis. As a result of which the idea of nation was fractured. The anti-caste movements highlighted that there is no one single identity called the 'Indian citizen'. It is rooted in specificities of caste, class, gender, and so on. Now, before we go into the history of these alternative articulations, it is important to first understand what is the caste system.

Historical analysis reveals that 'caste' has appeared as an integral part of Indian society, alive for three thousand years, and expanding its grip till date (Kosambi 1965; Thapar 2003). Although opinions vary regarding the manner and method of its operation, putatively the major reason for the survival of caste system has been its flexibility which makes it compatible to adapt in any condition and transform it into the desired form. Since the time of its inception, 'caste' has subdivided itself into multiple sub-castes – also known as the *jatis* – in order to encompass every difference of social stratification into its fora.

Sociology defines caste as a term denoting “an extreme form of social differentiation” hierarchically organized within a rigid system of stratification (Shashi 1992, 398). In such kind of system a person's social position is determined by birth, and marital connection outside one's caste is prohibited (Borgatta and Borgatta 1992, 172). Widely distributed through four 'varnas'—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—caste system is divided into further sub-categories called 'jatis'. There is also a fifth group—Shudrashudra (or Atishudra) or Untouchables—who are placed even lower than the Shudras. This social categorisation, inherent in Indian life and rooting its seed in Hindu religion, functions through four major components -- endogamy – or marriage within one's varna and jati which ensures the continuation of caste system among the progenies and the blood retained within the boundaries of particular castes, labor, possession of land, and purity-pollution system that creates hierarchy among castes. However, it is worth mentioning here that caste system in the Indian subcontinent has not remained limited within Hindu religion alone. Writings by dalit Christians and dalit Muslims prove that caste is not a religion specific matter. Geographical boundaries are more important while determining the expansion of caste system than the narrow quarters of a single religion. In other words, caste system is profoundly visible in the Indian subcontinent rather than a particular religion. This hierarchical institution of caste is a closed, birth-based, system where every person born into a caste invariably belongs to the caste till his or her death. Although references are available in ancient scriptures about movement through castes when women of lower castes marry men from the castes higher than them, in more recent times, individual social mobility in castes is almost absent. And this is made possible through the continual practice of endogamous marriage -- an issue which Ambedkar specifically mentioned as the endemic reason for the proliferation and

sustenance of caste system. In an effort to understand how caste is a system constituted by multiple and mutually intersecting components, Ambedkar argues, "Caste in India means an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. Thus the conclusion is inevitable that Endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste, and if we succeed in showing how endogamy is maintained, we shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of Caste." (Ambedkar, 1979a, pp. 7-8). Ambedkar's analysis of the origin and operation of the caste system reveals it as 'a parcelling of an already homogeneous unit' (Ambedkar, 1979a, p. 3). In order to explain this process, Ambedkar centralises his argument on endogamy as a mechanism that protects and perpetuates caste system. Endogamy, i.e. the process of fixing marriages within castes, justifies the exclusivity of caste groups and ascertains the logic of birth based origin. In an extremely nuanced understanding of the cause and effect of endogamy, Ambedkar propounds the issue of parity between marriageable units within specific castes. He notes that India in the ancient period was primarily exogamous. In a clan-based community, exogamy helped maintain unity among different clans through marriage. As a result, marriage within one's blood-kin and within the same class was highly discouraged (p. 8).

Commenting on division of labor being an often-debated feature of caste system, Christopher J. Fuller writes, "In theory, the caste system defines a division of labour, and in practice many occupations are caste-specific, especially in the services and artisan sectors. . . . Nevertheless . . . the division of labour has never been fully determined by caste." (Fuller 2003. Pp. 478). Despite the contradictions among sociologists regarding the validity of division of labor as a caste-specification, the ever-increasing influence of caste as the reservoir and enthusiast of social inequality and discrimination remain undisputed. In this hierarchical system, at the top are the Brahmins and at the bottom are the various castes such as Untouchables and so on. But as M. N. Srinivas mentions, in some villages one caste which is not often Brahmin caste turns out to be the dominant caste because it exercises preponderant control over the agrarian economy and the local political system. (Srinivas [1955] 1969).

The division of labor within the caste system has been a subject of extensive debate among sociologists and anthropologists. Christopher J. Fuller, in his analysis, highlights both the theoretical and practical dimensions of this feature. He states: "In theory, the caste system defines a division of labour, and in practice many occupations are caste-specific, especially in the services and artisan sectors. Nevertheless the division of labour has never been fully determined by caste." (Fuller, *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 2003, p. 478). This suggests that while caste-based occupational roles have historically been rigidly assigned, the system has not always functioned with absolute determinism. Social mobility, economic changes, and regional variations have allowed for deviations from strictly caste-bound labor divisions. This perception however, is not true. Take for example sewage cleaning which has remained restricted to the untouchable caste through centuries. In fact, the caste system remains a deeply entrenched structure that perpetuates social hierarchy and exclusion, reinforcing inequalities in both economic and social spheres. Though some sociologists debate the extent to which caste dictates occupation, there is little dispute regarding caste's role in sustaining discrimination and social inequality. Within this hierarchical system, the Brahmins—traditionally considered the priestly and scholarly class—occupy the highest position, while those belonging to the so-called "lower" castes, such as the Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), Shudras, and other marginalized communities, are placed at the bottom. This structured inequality has persisted over centuries, shaping access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. In his seminal work, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, M N Srinivas introduces the concept

of dominant caste, explaining that in many villages, the most influential caste is not necessarily the Brahmins but rather a group that wields significant control over the agrarian economy and local political structures. This caste, often composed of landowners and economically powerful groups, asserts its dominance by influencing social customs, labor relations, and even access to local governance. Such cases highlight the complex and dynamic nature of caste power, where economic and political authority can sometimes outweigh traditional ritual supremacy. Thus, while the caste system is often understood in terms of a rigid hierarchy, sociological analyses reveal that it also operates through fluid, context-specific structures of power that extend beyond mere occupational roles. Whether through ritual status or economic and political influence, caste continues to be a decisive factor in shaping India's social and economic landscape.

From these readings, we can come to a following understanding. Caste system is perhaps one of the most ambiguous and evasive social practices. The *Manusmriti* suggests which punctilious details the extreme rigidity of caste regulations. But at the same time it professes the laxity of such rules wherein intercaste union among upper caste men and lower caste women were allowed with minimal retribution. This leads to the conclusion that caste system is intended to retain social hierarchy and it works in favour of the handful few powerful, in this case the Brahmins and upper castes. Thus, all of a sudden it becomes clear that while presenting a polemical-historical critique of caste, we need to approach it through Brahmanism.

Let us revise the lesson. As it appears in the early brahmanical scriptures such as the Vedas, there are four branches of Indian caste, representing Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, in hierarchical order. The Brahmans who were at the highest position of the social ladder monopolized the positions of priest and teachers in the Vedic era. The Kshatriyas were involved in politics and military affairs and represented what we may call 'the macho hero' today. The Vaishyas formed the commoner ranks of cultivators, herders and merchants, and the Shudras were at the lowest rung of the strata, forced to opt for servitude to the upper castes. However, there was yet another caste (allegedly added at a later date) called the 'untouchables' in which the chandalas (people who were in charge of burning dead bodies) were put. The lower castes were deprived of any facility the society provided (education etc) and the untouchables had to live outside the boundary of the village. Bringing the reference of varna and jati mentioned earlier, we may see that this distinction is a juxtaposition of 'caste' as given by birth and as carried through profession. And interlinked with these factors was a primary role of caste which ascertained its closed communal role, that is, endogamy. Based on the principles of 'purity' and 'pollution', caste was as much about keeping the 'polluted' (the untouchables) away, as it were about maintaining the 'purity' of the upper castes. Perceived thus, one can easily recognize the politics of centrality and marginalization the caste system was engraving in Indian society for centuries.

The *Dharmashastra* defined the chandalas as people who pollute the twice-born persons by either direct or indirect contact. "Pollution will occur if these people were touched, conversed with, or even looked upon. In the case of such pollution, rites of purification must be performed. If the candela was touched, you must be bathe submerging the entire body; if conversed with, exchanged words with a brahmana; if looked upon, observe the lights (sun, moon or stars). Causing more impurity, like intercourse with a candela woman, required more difficult penances, including fasting like sudras, chandalas were completely [sic] excluded from the religious (Brahmanistic) practices of the twice-born." (Paswan, Sanjay and Paramanshi Jaideva eds. "Social Injustice." *Encyclopedia of Dalits in India Vol. 7*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2002. Pp 23-24).

But what about the lower caste women? What was their condition? In the Jataka stories we find evidences of lower caste women working alongside lower caste men, giving a glimpse of

a certain amount of (at least in terms of labour) gender equality which was absent among the upper castes. The lower caste women were not only allowed to go outside the thresholds of the house and participate in the work that the lower caste men performed, they were also allowed to marry if the husband were dead or absent. However, instances of their extreme exploitation in the hands of the upper caste men are also mentioned. Treated as a 'property' of the upper caste people, the lower caste women were victims of public and gang rape. Despite such picturisations, we never hear the lower caste women's voice. Perceived as 'lustful women' deprived of any 'moral' sensibility, the lower caste women, like the black women, were thrice oppressed. "According to the famous Laws of Manu (Manusmriti), which attained its final form about two thousand years ago, untouchables were created from illicit (hypogamous) unions between Sudra men and women of the higher classes. . . . Indeed, on the origins and early development of the caste system there are hardly any sound data, so that most modern scholars have rightly abandoned speculations about them." (Fuller, J. Christopher. "Caste". In *The Oxford Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*, ed. Veena Das. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 478-9). A major feature, or limitation, one faces while discussing about caste is that there is no fixed meaning or definition of it. Depending on the political, social, cultural and economic changes, caste has perceived an enormous amount of shifts in its conceptualization. In the next lectures we will dive deep into the various anti-caste movements.