Caste and Class: a Reinterpretation

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It is generally accepted that caste and class are different forms of social stratification. At the same time it is found that both caste and class systems may coexist in the same society. This is particularly so in India. Therefore, the question about the relationship between caste and class becomes very important and yet this has not been satisfactorily explained. Most of the studies in social stratification resolve this issue in one of two ways: (i) by treating caste and class as qualitatively distinct forms of social stratification so that class system may operate within each caste group, but the two systems cannot cut across each other, and (ii) by regarding caste system as a limiting case of the class system so that the former differs from the latter only in degree. However, neither of these views helps clarify how caste system may transform itself into class system and vice-versa.

Let us try to understand the nature of the problem by examining briefly the two different types of concepts of caste. One of the well known Indian authorities on the subject, G. S. Ghurye, describes caste system by drawing attention to its six main features: (1) segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy of groups, (3) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, (4) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, (5) lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restrictions on marriage. He treats these features or elements as constituting a system but finds it difficult to explain the behaviour of the elements within the system. For, in the Indian society which is to a large extent characterised by caste system, while most of the elements are changing even rapidly, the endogamous character of the caste groups is not manifesting any noticeable signs of change. Ghurye has tried to resolve this inconsistency by maintaining that endogamy is the essence of the caste system. According to this view, the dissolution of endogamous groups is a necessary condition for the general transformation of caste system into class system. Until then,

1 This is SSRC Journal Paper No. 14. I am grateful to Harold F. Kaufman and Robert C. Angell for their helpful comments, Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University, Journal Paper No. 14. Data for this paper come from a study conducted cooperatively by the Department of Sociology, Panjab University and Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University.

the functioning of the class system would be confined within each caste group.

The second variety of concepts of caste is exemplified by the description in MacIver and Page. These authors derive the concept of caste from that of class. Defining class as "any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status," they argue that in a society based on class system, the status of an individual is not fixed. But "when status is wholly predetermined, so that men are born to their lot in life without any hope of changing it, then class takes the extreme form of caste." According to their elaboration, the caste system has evolved from the class system; a caste group is endogamous and its endogamous character is derived from the predetermined and fixed status of the individual members. Consequently, a change in the caste system would entail a change in the endogamous character of the caste groups.

Both the above concepts do not satisfactorily explain the change in the behaviour pattern ordinarily subsumed under the phenomenon of caste system. They also do not explain the historical process of the formation of caste groups. It is not clear how the status of members in a caste group is predetermined. Above all, they fail to indicate the process of transformation of one form of stratification system into another.

It, therefore, seems to us that in order to resolve these conceptual problems it is necessary to reconsider and modify the concept of caste system. However, there are a few important and commonly held propositions about social stratification, including caste and class, with which we are in agreement. These are (a) caste and class are different forms of social stratification, (b) social stratification is a "persistent system of ranking of social positions" or it is simply "the objective result of rating," and (c) whereas the units ranked in the class system are individuals, those ranked in the caste system are groups. We have also no serious objection to the widespread notion that the groups referred to as the units in the caste system are the endogamous groups, although as will be shown presently this is not quite accurate.

On the other hand we do not agree to the assumption which is equally widespread, that the endogamous character of castes is derived from the equal and fixed status of members. Nor do we subscribe to the proposition that the status of the members of an endogamous group is equal and fixed. We argue that there are a large number of factors like geographical, cultural, racial and kinship and other considerations, and that social status is only one of them, in the determination of endogamy. The mere existence of endogamous groups in a community does not constitute the caste system, for, endogamy has been found to be a universal phenomenon in society. It is the ranking of these groups which is the essential mark of caste system.

4 Although this idea is not explicitly stated in any of the works which have come to our notice, it is implied in some of the studies on caste and class. E.g., Egon Ernest Bergel op. cit., p. 4.