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Q1(b)

Analyse the changing nature of caste as a status group.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Define caste as a status group in **Weber's** sense of honour, lifestyle and closure
- **Analyse change:** from ritual hierarchy toward politics, class, urban occupation and legal equality
- Keep status honour in view so that change is not reduced to class alone
- Use Indian thinkers and post-Independence illustrations

Revision summary

Weber's status group is a community of honour, lifestyle and closure.

Caste fits this through hierarchy, endogamy and ritual ranking described by Ghurye, Dumont and **Ambedkar**.

Sanskritisation and the dominant caste show older strategies of status mobility and local power.

Law, reservations and democratic politics have recast caste as a public identity.

Urban class and occupation have loosened hereditary work more than they have loosened marriage.

Change is real, but caste has not ceased to be a status group.

Introduction

Max Weber defined a status group as a community of honour, lifestyle and social closure. Caste in India has long been such a group. It ranked people by birth, regulated marriage and occupation, and claimed ritual purity or pollution. That picture has not vanished. It has changed in important ways. The task is to analyse how caste still works as status, and how politics, law, markets and cities have altered its form.

Body**Caste as a status group**

Louis Dumont described caste as a system of hierarchy based on the opposition of pure and impure. G. S. Ghurye listed features such as segmental division, hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and marriage, and hereditary occupation. B. R. **Ambedkar** treated caste as a system of graded inequality that also divided the oppressed. As a status group, a caste claims honour, polices endogamy, and closes ranks against outsiders. **Weber's** idea of social closure fits this well. Economic class can cut across caste, as Andre Beteille showed in Tanjore, but honour and marriage still follow status more stubbornly than income does.

Changing nature

- **M. N. Srinivas described Sanskritisation as a status strategy:** a lower group copies the ritual style of a higher group. He also described the dominant caste, which holds land, numbers and local power even without the highest ritual rank. After Independence, the Constitution banned untouchability, and reservations created a new political career for caste as a vote bank and as a claim on the state. Rajni Kothari and later scholars of caste politics showed that caste became an instrument of democratic mobilisation. Urban jobs, education and migration weakened hereditary occupation. Yet matrimonial advertisements, honour violence and residential clustering show that status honour continues.

Dipankar Gupta argued that we now see competing hierarchies rather than one Dumontian ladder. Yogendra Singh spoke of modernisation of tradition. The change is therefore double. Caste is less a complete ritual cosmos in the city and the factory. It remains a status group in marriage, social honour and political identity. Class and party have entered the field, but they have not simply replaced status.

Flow diagram

Caste as status group -> Honour endogamy closure
Caste as status group -> Change
Change -> Politics and reservations
Change -> Class and urban occupation
Change -> Legal equality

Conclusion

Caste remains a **Weberian status** group of honour and closure, even as occupation and law have shifted. Politics, education and the market have changed its public face. Analysis must hold both the persistence of status and the new uses of caste in democracy and class.

Facts & figures

Weberian status

Honour and lifestyle that can operate beside class and party, with social closure around marriage and association.

Sanskritisation

Srinivas's term for a group's attempt to raise status by copying the ritual and lifestyle of a higher caste.

Ambedkar on graded inequality

Caste ranks groups against one another, so that status honour is itself a structure of oppression.