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Q1(a)

What, according to you, are the factors responsible for the continuance of caste system in India? Explain.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Caste System

Caste System: Perspectives (G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille); Features of caste system; Untouchability - forms and perspectives.

Core demand of the question

- Name the main factors that keep caste alive in contemporary India
- Treat caste as both ideology and organisation, not only as a village custom
- Use Ghurye, Dumont, Srinivas, Ambedkar, Beteille and Desai
- Show law, politics, marriage and the market as reproducing mechanisms

Revision summary

Caste continues as organisation and ideology, not only as village custom.

Ambedkar's endogamy, Dumont's hierarchy, and Ghurye's features still describe marriage, food and stigma.

Srinivas showed mobility inside caste; Beteille and Desai linked it to land, class and power.

The Constitution and reservations recast caste as a political identity rather than simply erasing it.

Markets and cities loosened occupation more than they loosened kinship.

Introduction

Caste did not survive in India because villagers are 'traditional'. It survived because it is still a **practical grammar** of marriage, occupation, ritual rank and political mobilisation. **G. S. Ghurye** listed its classical features. **B. R. Ambedkar** located its engine in **endogamy**. **Louis Dumont** stressed the ideology of purity and pollution. **M. N. Srinivas** showed mobility inside the same ranked world. Continuance means these mechanisms still work after the Constitution, factories and cities.

Body**Ideology, ritual and everyday rank**

Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus argued that caste is a system of **status**, organised around purity and pollution, in which the priest encompasses the king. That ideology is weaker in a factory canteen than in a wedding kitchen, but it has not disappeared. Temple entry disputes, separate eating, and the stigma of sanitation work show that **untouchability** remains a living practice, not only a colonial census category. **Gopal Guru** and field reports on manual scavenging show how occupation and pollution still stick to Dalit labour even when the law forbids it.

Ghurye's features-segmental division, hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and marriage, civil and religious disabilities, and lack of free occupational choice-have loosened unevenly. Occupation opened more than marriage. That unevenness is itself a factor of continuance: people can work together and still refuse kinship.

Endogamy, kinship and the household

Ambedkar's 1916 essay treated **endogamy** as the key that closed the caste as a corporation. Matrimonial advertisements, caste-filtered apps, gotra and biradari councils, and honour violence keep that closure. **Irawati Karve** mapped regional kinship; those maps still organise who may marry whom. Residential nuclearisation, as **A. M. Shah** and **I. P. Desai** noted, does not dissolve the joint property and ritual unit. A software engineer in Bengaluru may still need a caste match for a sister's wedding. Kinship is therefore not a leftover. It is a daily factory of caste.

Economy, class and the village-city continuum

A. R. Desai read caste as ideology covering class. Land, tenancy and agricultural labour still follow jati lines in many regions. **André Beteille's** Tanjore work showed that caste, class and power overlap but are not identical; the overlap is enough to reproduce rank. In cities, **Nandini Gooptu** and labour studies show caste in informal work, domestic service, and hiring networks. The mill has declined; the **contract and gig** worker often still enters through a caste-kin chain. **Sanskritization** (Srinivas) and dominant-caste politics keep groups investing in caste identity because it yields honour and votes, not only ritual purity.

State, law and democratic politics

The Constitution abolished untouchability and promised equality. Reservation, SC/ST law, and the **Prevention of Atrocities Act** also **named** caste as a public identity. Caste associations became **interest groups** (**Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph: the modernity of tradition**). **Mandal politics, OBC lists, and sub-quotas made caste a language of rights.** **Dipankar Gupta** noted that caste today is often a competition among blocks rather than a single ladder, yet competition still requires the block. The census debate, creamy-layer fights, and local panchayat seats reserved by caste all keep the category administratively alive.

- **So continuance is over-determined:** ideology, endogamy, labour markets, and the democratic state each give caste a job to do.

Flow diagram

Endogamy and kinship -> Continuance of caste
 Purity ideology -> Continuance of caste
 Labour and land -> Continuance of caste
 Politics and reservation -> Continuance of caste

Conclusion

Caste continues because endogamy, ritual rank, labour recruitment and electoral organisation still pay. Law weakened some disabilities without dismantling the marriage market or the pollution of certain work. A sociological account therefore names several reproducing factors rather than a single leftover custom.

Facts & figures

Ambedkar 1916

Treats endogamy as the mechanism that closes caste as a social group.

Ghurye

Listed segmental division, hierarchy, feeding and marriage rules, disabilities and occupational closure as caste features.

PoA Act 1989

Criminalises caste atrocities; its use and misuse debates show caste as a living legal category.

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