



FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES

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Lecture- 26



LECTURE 26:

Dominant Caste: Characteristics and Criticism of Dominant Caste

Dominant Caste: Characteristics and Criticism of Dominant Caste! The concept of 'dominant caste' was propounded by M.N. Srinivas. It was for the first time appeared in his essay on the social system of a Mysore village. While constructing the concept, perhaps Srinivas was unconsciously influenced by African studies on the dominant clan and dominant lineage. Srinivas developed the concept in his study of Rampura village which is a little away from Mysore city in Karnataka state. Srinivas, in fact, wanted to give a comprehensive study of Rampura. To write down the details of the village he had gone to Stanford for writing down a monograph on Rampura. But there "by a strange quirk of fate all the three copies of my fieldwork notes, processed over a period of eighteen years" were destroyed when a fire took place in his Stanford office. Everything was destroyed for Srinivas. Whatever he remembered about Rampura, later on came in the form of *The Remembered Village* (1976). The definition of 'dominant caste' has undergone some change over a period of time. Srinivas worked in Rampura in 1948. His finding was first reported in 1955. He defined the concept as below: The concept of dominant caste which has emerged in recent sociological research is important in this connection. A caste is dominant when wields economic or political power and occupies a fairly high position in hierarchy (even in the traditional system of a caste which acquired economic and political power did succeed in improving its ritual status). Srinivas says that the existence of dominant caste is not particular to Rampura only. It is found in other villages of the country also. For instance, in Mysore villages, Lingayat and Okkaliga; in Andhra Pradesh, Reddy and Kamma; in Tamilnadu, Gounder, Padayachi and Mudaliar; in Kerala, Nayar; in Maharashtra, Maratha; in Gujarat, Patidar; and in northern India, Rajput, Jat, Giar and Ahir are dominant castes. Traditionally, numerically small castes owning land in rural areas or wielding political power or inheriting a literary tradition were able to dominate the villages. Srinivas has provided historical reasons for the power exercised by the traditional higher castes. He says that the traditional high castes had influence because of western education and the benefits which they conferred. Earlier, numerical strength of a caste was not much important. But with the coming of adult suffrage and the reservation given to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, numerical strength has assumed importance. Srinivas writes: Nowadays, with the coming of adult suffrage, numerical strength has become very important and the leaders of the dominant castes help the political parties to secure votes. But the traditional forms of dominance have not entirely disappeared and neither has dominance shifted fully to the numerically strongest caste, there is no doubt, however, that there is a shift and this traditional phase is marked by inter-group tensions. But what is significant from our point of view is that in many parts of India there are castes which are decisively dominant. It was in 1962 that M.N. Srinivas specified the following three characteristics of a dominant caste: 1. A caste dominates when it wields economic and political power. 2. It has a high rank in caste hierarchy. 3. Numerical strength. The earlier definition of dominant caste was reviewed by writers of several village studies. Srinivas also looked into the field and the comments made by the others. In 1966, he reviewed his earlier definition which runs below: For a caste to be dominant, it should own a sizable amount of the arable land locally available, have strength of numbers, and occupy a high place in the local hierarchy. When a caste has all the attributes of dominance, it may be said to enjoy a decisive dominance. Characteristics: On the basis of the definitions of dominant caste given by Srinivas and the comments offered by other sociologists, a construct could be made which includes the ideal type of dominant caste. 1. Economic and political power: The power of a particular caste lies in the owning of land. The caste which has larger portion of the land in the village wields greater power. First, his agricultural income increases. The size of the land is also related to irrigation. In case of larger landowning and adequate irrigation facilities, naturally the yields of the casteman increase. Second, the larger landowning caste also provides jobs to the landless farmers and marginal farmers. Such a situation renders the super-ordinated landless labourers as the 'servants' of the large landowning caste. These castes also apply modern techniques of agriculture such as chemical manure, improved implements and new patterns of cropping. Yogendra Singh (1994)

observes that the social anthropologists have found the presence of dominant castes in most of the south Indian villages. The basic determinant of a dominant caste is the superior economic status, especially in land. In the south Indian villages, for instance, Brahmin and Okkaliga are dominant castes. "The Havik Brahmins in village Toltagadde in Malaud area of Mysore and Smarth Brahmins in the Kumbapettai village in Tanjore (Tamilnadu) have been observed to be dominant castes. Okkaliga are dominant in the village Rampura, Wangala and Delana studied in Mysore." Putting his analysis of dominant castes, Yogendra Singh observes: An interesting common factor which plays a very significant role in the dominance of these castes in the villages ... is their superior economic status, especially in land. Brahmins in Toltagadde have ownership of all cash crop land; Kumbapettai Brahmins traditionally controlled all land; Okkaligas in Wangala; and Delanas control more than 80 per cent of land; Rajputs in Senapur, eastern UP control 82 per cent of land in the village; and the Vaghela Rajputs in Cassandra village in Gujarat have control over all the land in the village. In all these villages the degree of dominance of these castes is high. Higher education is also accepted by the big landowning castes. Administrative and income generated in urban areas have also given economic power to these caste groups. Besides economic power, namely, agriculture and jobs in administration, the big landowning castes have increased their prestige and power because of their role in Panchayati Raj. Srinivas says that "the introduction of adult franchise and Panchayati Raj has resulted in giving a new sense of self-respect to the villagers". Srinivas argues that the economic and political power which has come to the big landowning castes has thus enhanced their power status.

2. High rank in caste hierarchy: Normally, the caste which is traditionally higher in the caste hierarchy enjoys the status of dominance. The Brahmins and the Rajputs have traditionally been dominant in the villages. The Brahmins have at the top of the caste hierarchy and they officiate at the religious festivals and rituals of the village. The Rajputs have been the feudal thakurs in the village. They have traditionally occupied larger portions of the village land. The economic and political power, thus, in the village has given the dominant status to the Brahmins and Rajputs. Recently, the criterion, namely, economic and political power, has undergone a change. The reservations made for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women have given a new attribute to the concept of dominant caste. As a result provision power has passed into the hands of numerically large landowning peasant castes. Some of the scheduled castes, who are numerically strong and also, take advantage of the new educational and other opportunities, available to them have also gained economic and political power. The high rank in the caste hierarchy has now gone in favour of those castes which have benefited from their reserved status. Now, the traditional higher status in the hierarchy no more remains an attribute of a dominant caste.

3. Numerical strength: Before the advent of modernisation and development, numerical strength did not have any strength of the dominance of a caste. Recently, numerical strength of a caste, assumes importance because of the vote bank created by adult suffrage. The castes which have larger number of voters, naturally, determine the fate of a candidate contesting elections. What is called these days as caste-war is actually the importance of a caste to determine the fate of a candidate. Now, a caste is dominant not only in single village. It extends to a cluster of villages. A caste group which has only a family or two in a particular village but which enjoys decisive dominance in the wider region will still count locally because of the network of ties binding it to its dominant relatives. What is equally important is that others in the village will be aware of the existence of this network. Contrariwise, a caste which enjoys dominance in only one village will find that it has to reckon with the caste which enjoys regional dominance.

4. A sizeable amount of the arable land: Normally, in India's villages, smaller number of big landowners occupy larger portion of land. In other words, the caste which has larger portion of village land wields power. The big landowners, thus, are patrons of the bulk of the poor villagers. In villages, those castes which have larger portion of land enjoy power and prestige. Srinivas says that landownership is a crucial factor in establishing dominance. He observes: Landownership confers not only power but prestige, so much so that, individuals who have made good in any walk of life tend to invest in land. If landownership is not always an indispensable passport to high rank, it certainly facilitates upward mobility.

Criticism: The decades of 1950s and 1960s in the field of rural sociology witnessed a keen competition between those who preferred Redfield's approach to village studies and Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of functional analysis. Despite differences in their approach, both the camps focused on culture. Later

on Louis Dumont stressed the importance of culture and caste as determining variables in the study of Indian civilisation as a whole. The concept of 'dominant caste', it is argued, has emerged out of the African studies on dominant class. When Srinivas put forward the concept of dominant caste, it was seriously commented upon by sociologists and social anthropologists. As a matter of fact, during 1950s and 1960s, the academic environment in the country, in rural sociology and social anthropology, was charged by studies on caste and village communities. Some of the criticisms of the concept have relevance even today in our understanding of rural society.