



CASTE DISCRIMINATION - GS I AND II MAINS

Q. Indian society to get out of caste hierarchy and eradicate all forms of visible or invisible discriminations to thrive as a vibrant democracy and an emerging economic power. Discuss (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *SC issues notice to Centre, states on PIL alleging caste discrimination in jails*

What's in the news?

- The Supreme Court issued notice to the Centre and 11 states on a public interest litigation (PIL) which alleged caste-based discrimination and segregation of prisoners in jails and sought a direction to repeal provisions that mandate such practices under the state prison manuals.

Key takeaways:

- The petition highlighted a few instances from Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Tamil Nadu jails, where cooking was undertaken by dominant castes while sweeping and other menial jobs such as cleaning toilets were to be undertaken by “specific lower castes”.

Caste System:

- The origins of the caste system in India can be traced back 3,000 years as a social **hierarchy based on one's occupation and birth.**
- It is a system that has evolved over the centuries under Muslim and British rule.
- The suffering of those who are at the bottom of the caste pyramid - known as Dalits has continued.
- Caste discrimination has been prohibited in India since 1948, a year after the nation's independence from British rule.

Features of Caste System:

1. Segmental Division of Society:

- The society is divided into various small social groups called castes. Each of these castes is a well developed social group, the membership of which is determined by the **consideration of birth.**

2. Hierarchy:

- According to Louis Dumont, castes teach us a fundamental social principle of hierarchy.



- At the top of this hierarchy is the Brahmin caste and at the bottom is the untouchable caste. In between are the intermediate castes, the relative positions of which are not always clear.

3. Endogamy:

- Endogamy is the chief characteristic of caste, i.e. the **members of a caste or sub-caste should marry within their own caste or sub-caste.**
- The violation of the rule of endogamy would mean ostracism and loss of caste.
- However, **hypergamy** (the practice of women marrying someone who is wealthier or of higher caste or social status) and **hypogamy** (marriage with a person of lower social status) were also prevalent.
- **Gotra exogamy** is also maintained in each caste. Every caste is subdivided into different small units on the basis of gotra. The members of one gotra are believed to be successors of a common ancestor-hence prohibition of marriage within the same gotra.

4. Hereditary status and occupation:

- Megasthenes, the Greek traveler to India in 300 B.C., mentions hereditary occupation as one of the two features of the caste system, the other being endogamy.

5. Restriction on Food and Drink:

- Usually, a caste would not accept cooked food from any other caste that stands lower than itself in the social scale, due to the notion of getting polluted.
- There were also variously **associated taboos** related to food. The cooking taboo, which defines the persons who may cook the food.

6. A Particular Name:

- Every caste has a particular name through which we can identify it. Sometimes, an occupation is also associated with a particular caste.

7. Concept of Purity and Pollution:

- The higher castes claimed to have ritual, spiritual and racial purity which they maintained by **keeping the lower castes away through the notion of pollution.**
- The idea of pollution means a touch of lower caste man would pollute or defile a man of higher caste. Even his shadow is considered enough to pollute a higher caste man.

8. Jati Panchayat:

- The status of each caste is carefully protected, not only by **caste laws** but also by the **conventions**. These are openly enforced by the community through a governing body or board called Jati Panchayat.

Impacts of Caste System:

1. Economic Impacts:

- Caste through its **rigid social control and networks** facilitates economic mobility for some and erects barriers for others by mounting disadvantages on them.
- The caste acts as a barrier to overall economic growth and development.



Caste impedes economic development of Individuals	Caste impedes economic development of the Society
Deprive land ownerships for low caste individuals.	Lack of success in land reform because caste based networks impedes the agricultural productivity of the nation.
Caste based occupation imposed on individuals irrespective of his/her education for example, manual scavenging, hair dressing.	Monopoly of particular caste networks in business impedes the competition and efficiency in National economic development. Castes that were already in control of trading and industrial spaces resisted the entry of others.
Aversion towards business of low caste people. For example, in rural India the tea shops run by Scheduled Caste won't be visited by other castes.	Caste based violence in society acts as a threat to future investments in our country.
Elite bias in higher education and historical neglect of mass education	Caste based exclusions will impact the talent pool of our nation and economic development.
Caste-based entry barriers and exclusive networks in the modern sector.	

2. Untouchability:

- Many villages are separated by caste and they may not cross the line dividing them from the higher castes. They also may not use the same wells or drink in the same tea stalls as higher castes.

3. Discrimination:

- They often do not have the facility to electricity, sanitation facilities or water pumps in lower caste neighbourhoods. Access to better education, housing and medical facilities than that of the higher castes is denied.

4. Slavery:

- They are subjected to exploitation in the name of debt, tradition, etc., to work as labourers or perform menial tasks for generations together.



5. Vote bank Politics:

- Usually, caste is proving a heavy weight on the political system and people under the influence of caste do not even vote for the most suitable person not belonging to their caste.
- There are many instances both at local and national, where caste has **influenced the course of elections and also in the selection of candidates.**

6. Inferior status of women:

- The worst effects of the caste system were borne by women members of the group.
- They were supposed to adhere to all the **social and cultural norms** that discriminated against them.
- On one hand, the upper caste women faced child marriage and widowhood at a younger age, the caste women faced physical and sexual harassment by the upper caste men.

Affirmative actions by government:

- Provisions in the **Constitution.**
- **Reservations** in jobs.
- Reservations in Centre and State legislatures.
- Provisions in panchayats.
- Protect stakeholders by various Acts, safeguarding their land, livelihood, and save them from social evils.

Factors Changing the Dynamics:

1. Modern education:

- Modern liberal education has played a crucial role in undermining the importance of caste in Indian social life.
- It **encourages inter-caste marriage and inter-caste mixing.** Moreover, it acts as a powerful force toward the removal of untouchability.

2. Industrialization:

- Industrial growth has provided new **sources of livelihood** to people and made occupational mobility possible.

3. Urbanization:

- Industrialization has given rise to the process of urbanization. **New townships** have emerged. The people from rural areas migrate to these towns in order to avail better employment opportunities.
- With the coming up of big hotels, restaurants, theaters, clubs and educational institutions it is not at all possible to observe communal inhibitions and taboos against food-sharing.

4. Modern means of transport and communication:

- Modern means of transport and communication are instrumental in **increasing the spatial mobility of the people** and thereby putting an end to the caste system.



- Means of transport like train, bus, tram, airplane etc. cannot provide for distinctions between castes, and a levelling effect has been brought into the society.

5. Increase in the importance of wealth:

- Under the caste system, ascription was taken as the basis of **social prestige**.
- But today, wealth has replaced ascription as the basis of social prestige. Occupations are now no longer caste-based. People while choosing their occupations attach greater importance to income rather than anything else.

6. The New Legal system:

- The new legal system has given a severe blow to the caste system in India.
- **Equality before law** irrespective of castes has been firmly instituted. Consequently, the age-old discrimination against the lower castes has been removed.
- Further, with the **establishment of law courts**, the traditional castes Panchayats have lost their power and effectiveness to punish the deviants.

7. Sanskritization:

- It is “the process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently ‘twice-born’ caste”.
- The members of the lower castes leave their own traditional ideals and behaviour patterns and accept the ideals and standards of higher castes.
- The caste system being a closed one, Sanskritization does not entail structural change. It entails positional change. Hence through Sanskritization, the lower caste people move up slightly in the scale of “Jatis” within particular varna.

8. Westernization:

- It signifies the changes in Indian society during British rule. By promoting **education, egalitarianism, rationalism, humanism and above all a critical outlook toward various social issues and problems**, westernization has gone a long way in undermining the influence of the caste system.
- It has given a severe blow to practices like child marriage, purity and pollution, commensality, untouchability etc. The effects of westernization are prominently visible in the form of inter caste marriages, inter-community marriages, inter-religious marriages, occupational changes etc.

9. Secularization:

- The role of secularization in weakening the caste system is great.
- By **legitimizing secular ideologies and formal legal doctrines and promoting rationality, scientific attitude and differentiation**, secularization has affected certain characteristics of the caste system especially the concept of purity and pollution, commensality, fixity of occupation etc.

10. Socialist ideas:

- The caste system is based on the ideas of high birth and low birth. On the other hand, socialists say, “the differences between human beings have been created by society; hence society only can remove them.” As a result of such socialist thought, the caste system is breaking.



11. Rise of new social classes:

- Industrialization has given rise to the emergence of new social classes. These social classes are replacing the traditional castes.
- Trade Unions, Merchants Associations and Political Parties are replacing the old caste loyalties. An increase in class consciousness leads to a decrease in caste consciousness.

12. Influence of Indian Constitution:

- Indian Constitution bestows some fundamental rights on the citizens irrespective of caste, creed, colour or sex.
- It offers equal opportunities to all. The Constitution, which declares all citizens as equal, directly attacks the Hindu social order based on inherited inequality. No wonder the caste system is withering away.

It is high time for the Indian society to get out of caste hierarchy and eradicate all forms of visible or invisible discrimination's and consider all social groups equal in real sense. To thrive as a **vibrant democracy and an emerging economic power** will depend much on how far Indian society embraces equality, fraternity and harmony.

