

Social Institutions: Continuity and Change

I. Introduction to Social Institutions

A population is not merely a collection of unrelated individuals; it is a society composed of distinct but interlinked classes and communities.

These groups are sustained and regulated by social institutions and social relationships. Sociology focuses on the basic building blocks of Indian society, specifically the institutions of caste, tribe, and family.

While often viewed as ancient or unchanging, these institutions have undergone intense social change over centuries and continue to be reshaped in the contemporary era.

Additionally, the market functions as a powerful social institution that drives historical and economic change.

II. The Caste System

Caste is a unique and ancient social institution that has been part of Indian history for thousands of years, yet it remains a definitive part of modern society.

1. Defining Features of Caste The traditional caste system is defined by several rigid characteristics:

- **Determined by Birth:** A person is born into the caste of their parents; it is never a matter of choice.
- **Endogamy:** Membership involves strict rules about marriage, restricting it to members of the same group.
- **Food and Commensality:** Rules prescribe what kinds of food may be eaten and with whom it can be shared.

- **Hierarchy:** The system consists of many castes arranged in a ladder of rank and status.

- **Segmental Organisation:** Castes involve sub-divisions, known as sub-castes, which may have further sub-divisions.

- **Hereditary Occupation:** Traditionally, caste dictated occupational opportunities, though this has weakened in modern times.

2. Continuity and Change in Caste While colonialism and modernisation altered the caste structure, the institution has shown remarkable resilience.

- **Cultural and Domestic Strength:** Caste remains strongest in the private sphere; endogamy persists as most marriages still occur within caste boundaries.

- **Democratic Politics:** The political sphere has seen significant change, with caste becoming a basis for mass mobilisation and identity assertion.

- **The Invisibility of Caste:** For the urban upper-caste elite, caste has become relatively "invisible". Their inherited economic and educational capital is often sufficient to maintain their status, leading them to believe their advancement is based solely on merit rather than caste privilege.

- **Macro-level Stability:** Despite individual mobility, the caste-class correlation remains remarkably stable at the macro level. High castes generally maintain high economic status, while low castes remain disproportionately poor.

3. **Key Concepts:** Sanskritisation and Dominant Caste Sociologist M.N. Srinivas coined two vital terms to understand social mobility:

- **Sanskritisation:** The process by which a "low" caste or tribe adopts the customs, rituals, and style of life of a high, "twice-born" (*dwija*) caste to raise their social status.
- **Dominant Caste:** Refers to middle or upper-middle ranking castes that have a large population and acquired land rights, making them politically and economically powerful in rural regions (e.g., Jats in UP, Vokkaligas in Karnataka).

- **Acquired Traits:** Mode of livelihood (e.g., food gatherers, shifting cultivators, industrial workers) and the extent of assimilation into Hindu society.

2. Historical Context and Contact Contrary to the view that tribes lived in total isolation, they have had long histories of interaction with mainstream society.

- **Gond Kingdoms:** Historically, adivasis were not always oppressed; several Gond kingdoms existed in Central India.

- **Trade Niche:** They occupied special niches trading forest produce, salt, and elephants.

- **Colonial Exploitation:** The British "opened up" tribal areas to exploit mineral and forest resources, leading to the influx of moneylenders and the loss of tribal land.

3. Tribal Identity Today Contemporary tribal identities are formed through interaction with the mainstream, often centred on resistance and opposition to unfavorable terms of incorporation.

- **Internal Differentiation:** The emergence of an educated tribal middle class has led to new assertions of identity based on culture, tradition, and control over resources.

- **Resource Alienation:** Major issues today include the loss of forest land due to development projects like the Sardar Sarovar dam, which displaced hundreds of thousands of adivasis.



III. Tribal Society

The term 'tribe' is a modern concept used to describe communities that are among the oldest inhabitants of the subcontinent.

1. Classifications of Tribes Tribes are often defined by what they are not: they traditionally lacked written religious texts, formal state political forms, and sharp class divisions. They are classified by:

- **Permanent Traits:** Region, language, physical characteristics, and ecological habitat.

IV. Family and Kinship

The family is a private sphere linked to the public spheres of economy, politics, and culture. It is often a site of both immense warmth and bitter conflict, including disputes over property or gender-based violence.

1. Diverse Forms of the Family

- **Nuclear vs. Extended:** A nuclear family consists of one set of parents and children, while an extended (or joint) family includes more than one couple and often multiple generations.
- **Rule of Residence:** Societies can be matrilineal (living with the woman's parents) or patrilineal (living with the man's parents).
- **Descent and Authority:** Matrilineal societies pass property from mother to daughter, while patrilineal pass it from father to son. Patriarchy involves male dominance, whereas matriarchy (a theoretical concept with no empirical evidence of total female dominance) would involve female dominance.

2. Structural Changes in the Family Family structures change in response to broader social shifts.

- **Migration:** Men migrating from Himalayan villages for work can lead to a rise in women-headed families.
- **Economic Factors:** The demands of the software industry may require grandparents to move in as primary caregivers for grandchildren.
- **Resisting Norms:** Changes in family norms, such as young people choosing their own spouses or the open expression of same-sex love, are often resisted violently because they challenge deep-seated cultural values.

V. The Market as a Social Institution

Sociologists view the market as a socially embedded institution, constructed in culturally specific ways and often controlled by particular social groups.

1. Sociological Perspective vs. Economic Perspective While modern economics (influenced by Adam Smith) often studies the economy as a separate part of society, sociologists argue that markets are linked to other institutions like caste and kinship.

Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" suggests that rational self-interest in a free market leads to economic well-being, but sociologists focus on the social frameworks that organize these exchanges.

2. The Weekly Tribal Market (Haat) In agrarian and tribal areas, the weekly haat is a central social and economic institution.

- **Economic Linkages:** It sell local agricultural/forest produce to traders and allows locals to buy essentials like salt and tools.
- **Social Intercourse:** For many, the primary reason to attend is social—meeting kin, arranging marriages, and exchanging gossip.



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3. Caste-Based Markets and Networks Traditional business communities in India, such as the Nakarattars or Marwaris, operate through dense caste and kinship networks.

- **Trust and Credit:** Businessmen are more likely to trust their own kin, creating monopolies within certain sectors.

- **Hundi:** A pre-colonial bill of exchange that allowed merchants to engage in long-distance trade because it was honoured by other members of the same network in different locations.
- **Vaisya Status:** While some castes are traditionally "Vaisya," others claim this status through upward mobility as they enter trade and commerce.

4. Globalisation and Commodification

- **Commodification:** The process of turning something that was not previously traded (like labour, social skills, or marriage) into a commodity that can be bought and sold. Examples include marriage bureaus and "personality development" classes.
- **Status Symbols:** As pointed out by Max Weber, the goods people buy are markers of their socio-economic status, such as specific brands of cell phones or cars.
- **Liberalisation:** This policy involves the reduction of government interference in markets, such as withdrawing support prices and subsidies, which has exposed Indian farmers and manufacturers to intense global competition.

