

Course : M. A. (Hons.) Sociology

Paper Code: SOCY 4108

Paper Title: Social Stratification and
Mobility

Topic Covered : The Caste System

Upside Down by J. Mencher, *Current
Anthropology*, 1974

Course Teacher : Mritunjay Kumar
Yadavendu, Assistant

Professor, Department of Sociology

- J. Mencher in her article 'The Caste System Upside Down' challenges the dominant view of looking at caste system from top to down.
- In this article she presents a different vantage point for the study of caste system in India.
- This paper uses historical materials from various parts of India.
- It also uses contemporary material from Tamilnadu to investigate the role of caste system in preventing the formation of social classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose.

- She makes two propositions to demonstrate his view
 - First proposition – ‘Caste system has functioned to prevent the formation of social classes with commonality of interests or purpose.’
 - Second proposition – ‘caste system functioned primarily as one of economic exploitation and not one wherein every caste has its special privileges.’

- She argues, on the basis of evidence that the people of wealth and power or influence have put great emphasis on caste system in an attempt to prevent the recognition and conscious development of organised class based groups in Indian society.
- Caste is used by them to exploit the labour of the landless caste groups.

- Mencher's argument is that the caste system denies the 'harijan's the right to own land on which the economic position of the landlords depends.
- This way she is taking a bottom up approach and questioning the notion of caste as 'interdependence and reciprocity', primarily the jajamani system approach.
- This separation of caste hindu landlords from landless actually prevents the formation of social classes.

- In her bottom up approach caste appears more as a system of exploitation than interdependence and reciprocity.
- She considers the theory of interdependence as rationalisation of inequality of caste system by 'upper castes'.
- Mencher further argues that this particular ideology prevents the rebel on the part of the landless peasants as caste prevents the formation of social classes.

- The top bottom approach makes caste system appear more paternalistic hence an emphasis on dharma and karma, argues Mencher.
- The ideas of dharma and karma rationalises the caste system, justify it and maintain it.
- The caste system prevented the development of common socioeconomic status because of its emphasis on ritual criteria of caste membership.

- She said that it is a worldwide phenomena that all stratified societies have people who live in luxury and oppress others.
- Ironically, social studies in India have ignored this aspect and looked at caste system not as exploitative but as a system of interdependence and reciprocity.
- But bottom up approach shed a new light on this perspective.

- Indian society might be different in many ways from other societies but it shares this fundamental aspect of exploitation of masses.
- The people at the bottom of the caste system offer a materialistic perspective on caste than the people at the top.
- ‘upper castes’ use ideological deceptions to rationalise the exploitation and prevent the unity of exploited castes.

Thank You!

