

THE MOST COMMONLY CITED FEATURES OF CASTE

1. **Caste is determined by birth** – a child is “born into” the caste of its parents. Caste is never a matter of choice. One can never change one’s caste, leave it, or choose not to join it, although there are instances where a person may be expelled from their caste.
2. Membership in a **caste involves strict rules about marriage**. Caste groups are “**endogamous**”, i.e. marriage is restricted to members of the group.
3. Caste membership also involves **rules about food and food-sharing**. What kinds of food may or may not be eaten is prescribed and who one may share food with is also specified.
4. Caste involves **a system consisting of many castes** arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status. In theory, every person has a caste, and every caste has a specified place in the hierarchy of all castes. While the hierarchical position of many castes, particularly in the middle ranks, may vary from region to region, there is always a hierarchy.
5. Castes involve **sub-divisions within themselves**, i.e., castes almost always have sub-castes and sometimes sub-castes may also have sub-sub-castes. This is referred to as a segmental organisation.
6. **Castes were traditionally linked to occupations**. A person born into a caste could only practice the occupation associated with that caste, so that occupations were hereditary. On the other hand, a particular occupation could only be pursued by the caste associated with it – members of other castes could not enter the occupation

CASTE AS AN UNEQUAL INSTITUTION

- Historically some castes benefitted greatly from the system, while others were condemned to a life of endless labour and subordination.
- The hierarchical ordering of castes is based on the distinction between ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’. This is a division between something believed to be closer to the sacred (thus connoting ritual purity), and something believed to be distant from or opposed to the sacred, therefore considered ritually polluting.
- Castes that are considered ritually pure have high status, while those considered less pure or impure have low status.
- Each caste has its own place in the system which cannot be taken by any other caste. Since caste is also linked with occupation, the system functions as the social division of labour, except that, in principle, it allows no mobility.

CONCLUSION

Just because something happened in the past or is part of our tradition, it is not necessarily right or wrong forever. Every age has to think afresh about such questions and come to its own collective decision about its social institutions.