



Social Institutions: Continuity and Change

CASTE AND JATI

CASTE

The English word “caste” is borrowed from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning “pure breed.” In Indian languages, the institution of caste is referred to through two important terms: *varna* and *jati*.

VARNA

Varna literally means “colour.” It refers to the four-fold division of society: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra. This four-fold classification excluded groups described as outcastes, sometimes referred to as Panchamas or the fifth category.

JATI

Jati is a generic term referring to species or kinds of things, including plants, animals and human beings. In Indian languages, *jati* is the word most commonly used for the institution of caste. *Jati* refers to the regional or local classification consisting of hundreds or even thousands of castes and sub-castes.

VARNA vs JATI

VARNA	JATI
Broad, all-India classification	Regional/local classification
Four-fold division	Hundreds or thousands of groups
Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra	Numerous castes and sub-castes
More of an ideal/scriptural classification	More closely connected with lived social reality
Common to the idea of an all-India hierarchy	Varies from region to region

The NCERT specifically cautions that the relationship between *varna* and *jati* is a matter of scholarly debate; the usual interpretation treats *varna* as the broad all-India classification and *jati* as the much more complex regional/local classification.

TIME PERIOD OF CASTE

Roughly 3,000 years ago

The four-varna classification is generally considered to be roughly 3,000 years old.

Late Vedic Period – 900–500 BCE

In its earliest phase, the caste system was essentially a varna system. It consisted of only four major divisions. These divisions were not very elaborate or rigid. They were not determined by birth. Movement across categories appears to have been possible and relatively common.

Post-Vedic Period

It was during the post-Vedic period that caste developed into the more rigid institution familiar from standard definitions.

Important NCERT point:

It is misleading to imagine that exactly the same caste system continued unchanged for 3,000 years. Its form and meaning changed across historical periods.

FEATURES OF THE CASTE SYSTEM



1. Birth-based membership

A person is born into a caste. Caste is not normally a matter of individual choice.



2. Endogamy

Marriage is restricted to members of the caste. Thus, caste groups are endogamous.



3. Food and food-sharing rules

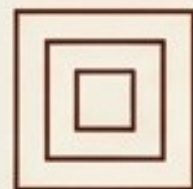
Caste traditionally involved rules regarding:

- What food could be eaten.
- From whom food could be accepted.
- With whom food could be shared.



4. Hierarchy

Castes are arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status. Every caste occupies a particular position within the hierarchical order.



5. Segmental organisation

Castes contain sub-divisions. These may further contain sub-sub-divisions. This is called segmental organisation.

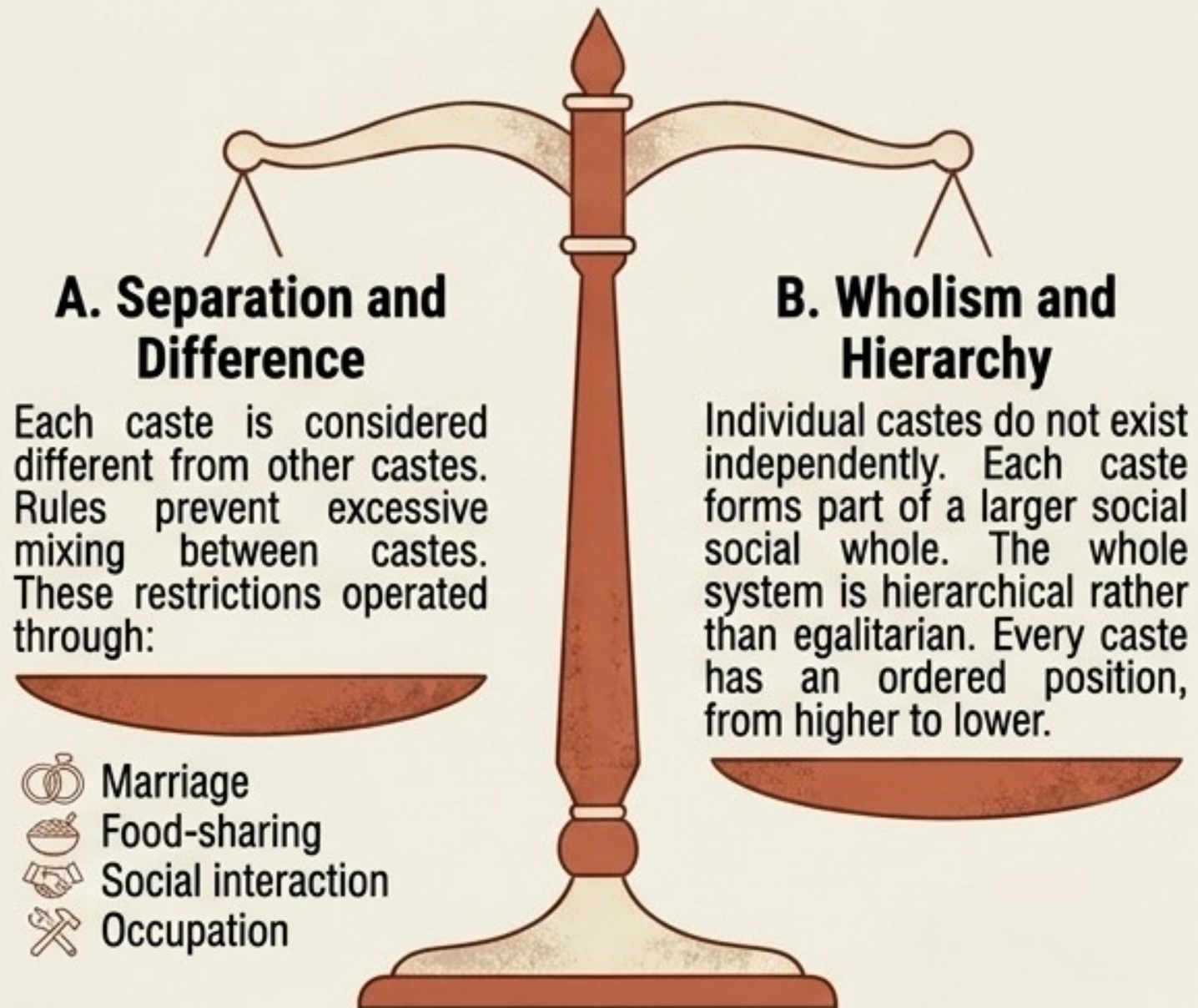


6. Occupational linkage

Castes were traditionally linked with specific occupations. Occupations were therefore hereditary, passing from one generation to another.

FUNCTIONING PRINCIPLE OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The caste system can theoretically be understood through two major principles:



HIERARCHICAL ORDER

Purity and Pollution

Caste hierarchy is traditionally based on the distinction between purity and pollution. Groups considered closer to the sacred were regarded as ritually pure. Groups considered distant from or opposed to the sacred resrred as ritually polluting.

Thus, greater ritual purity → higher status
Greater ritual pollution → lower status.

Power and Status

Material power, including economic and military power, is closely associated with social status. Those possessing power tend to have higher status. Historical evidence also suggests that groups defeated in wars were sometimes assigned lower caste status.

Complementarity

Castes were not only unequal; they were also supposed to be complementary and non-competing groups. Each caste had a specific place in the system. Caste therefore functioned as a form of social division of labour, although traditionally it allowed little mobility.

CASTE: THEN & NOW

CASTE IN COLONIAL INDIA

Colonial Period

Modern history may be divided at 1947, with the colonial period roughly extending from around 1800 to 1947. Colonialism brought fundamental changes to caste.

British surveys and studies

British administrators conducted systematic surveys and reports on the customs and manners of castes and tribes. Many officials were also interested in ethnological studies.

Census

The census became especially important. Census operations began in 1860s. They became a regular ten-yearly exercise from 1881. The 1901 Census, under Herbert Risley, attempted to record the social hierarchy of caste.

Effect

Caste identities that had previously been relatively fluid and less rigid became more formally counted, classified and recorded. Different caste groups began submitting petitions claiming a higher position in the social hierarchy.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

The colonial administration also focused on the welfare of the "depressed classes." The Government of India Act, 1935 gave legal recognition to schedules of castes and tribes marked for special treatment. This is associated with the emergence of the terms Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

CASTE IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

Independence in 1947 marked a major, but only partial, break with the colonial past. Caste had already played an important role in nationalist mobilisation. Reformers and leaders such as:

Jotiba Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ayyankali, Sri Narayana Guru, Iyothedass, Periyar worked against caste oppression and untouchability.

Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar organised protests against untouchability from the 1920s.

After Independence

The Indian state committed itself to the abolition of caste-based discrimination. Reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were an important exception to a completely caste-blind approach.

Modern industry and urbanisation created occupations and social settings that were not governed by traditional caste rules.

However, caste continued to remain strong particularly in:

Marriage, Kinship, Domestic life, Social networks.

Endogamy remained particularly resilient. Caste also became for deeply connected with electoral politics.

SANSKRITISATION

M. N. Srinivas

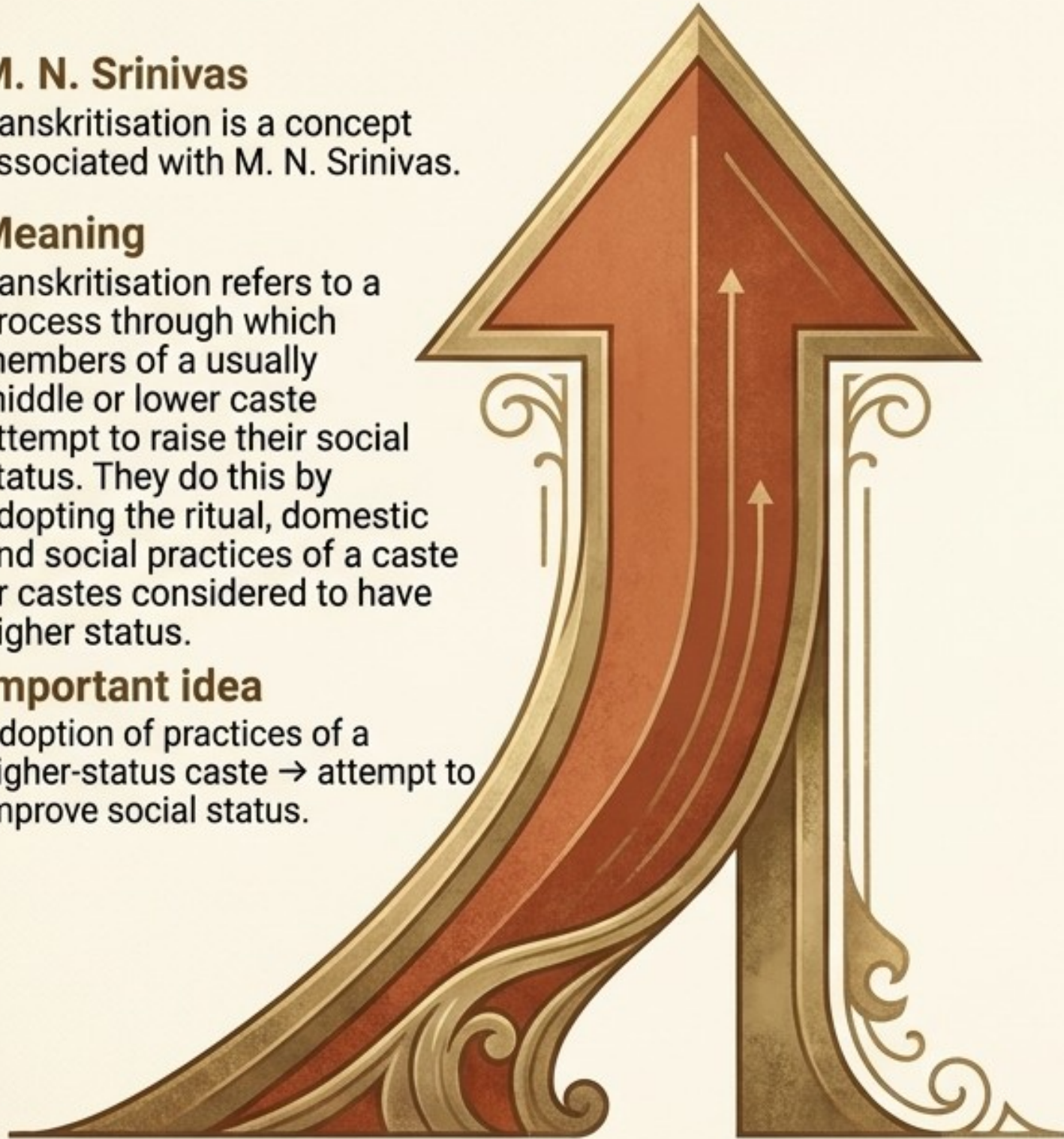
Sanskritisation is a concept associated with M. N. Srinivas.

Meaning

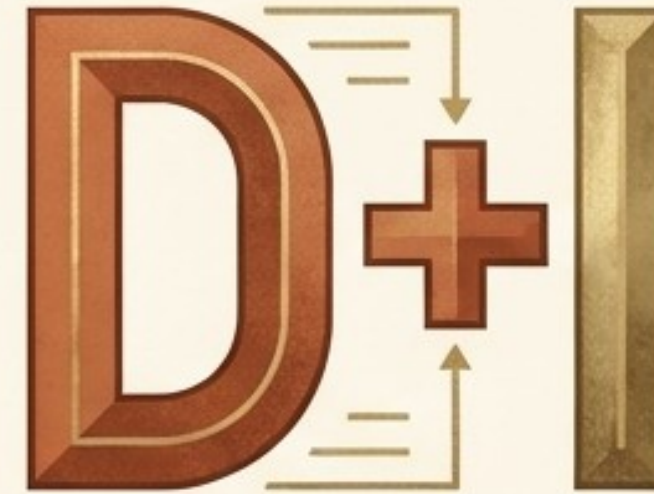
Sanskritisation refers to a process through which members of a usually middle or lower caste attempt to raise their social status. They do this by adopting the ritual, domestic and social practices of a caste or castes considered to have higher status.

Important idea

Adoption of practices of a higher-status caste → attempt to improve social status.



DOMINANT CASTE



Meaning

A dominant caste refers to castes that:

Have a large population, and

Acquired land rights through the partial land reforms after Independence.



How did they become dominant?

Land reforms weakened the position of former absentee landlords, often from upper castes.

Land rights shifted towards the next layer of claimants.

These intermediate castes acquired economic power through land.

Their large numbers also gave them political power under universal adult franchise.

**Land + large population + economic power
+ political power → Dominant Caste**

Examples

Yadavs — Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Vokkaligas — Karnataka.

Reddys and Khammas — Andhra Pradesh.

Marathas — Maharashtra.

Jats — Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh.

Patidars — Gujarat.

TRIBAL SOCIETY: WHO ARE THEY?

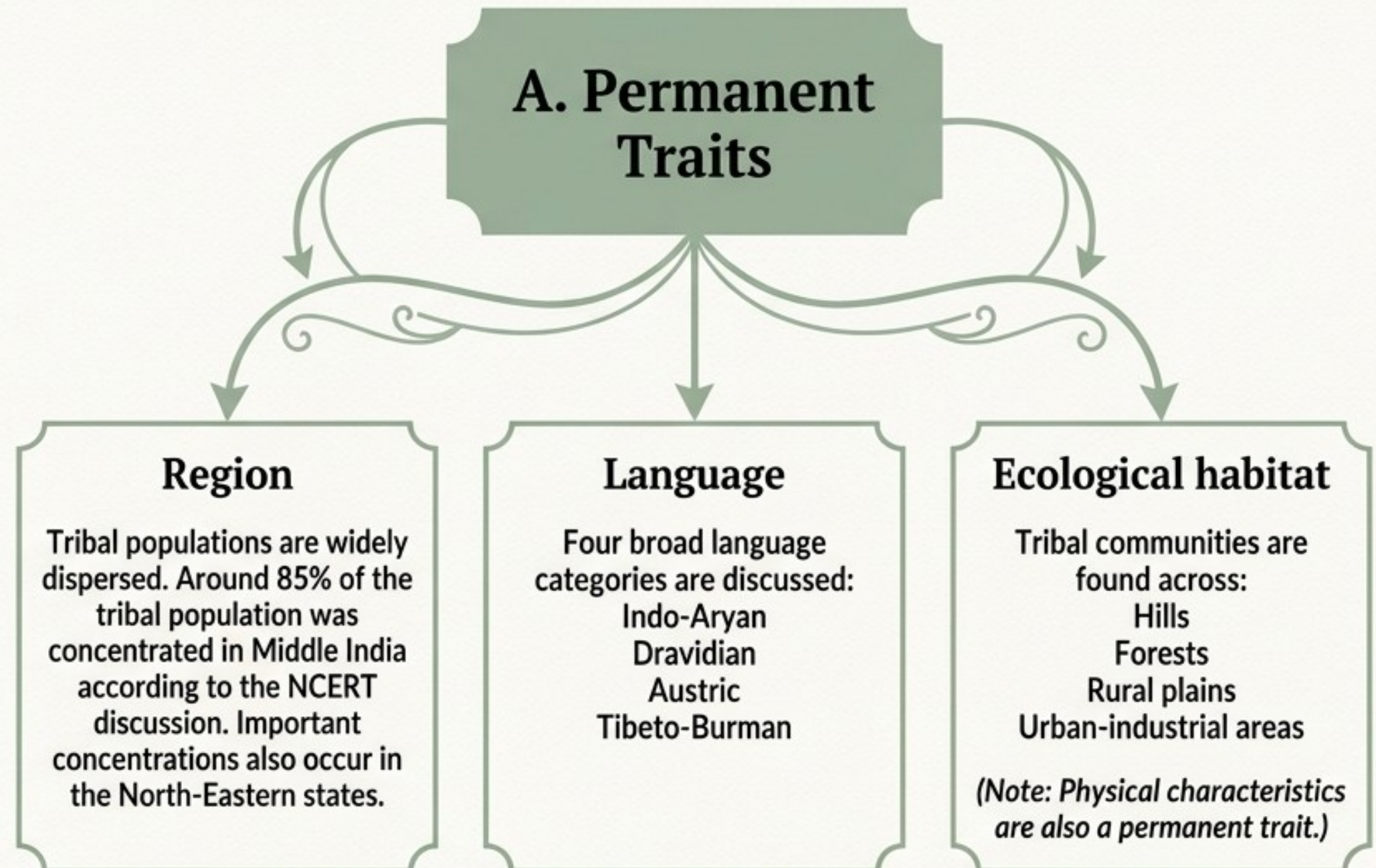
“Tribe” is a modern term used for communities that are very old and are among the oldest inhabitants of the subcontinent. Tribes have often historically been defined in terms of what they did not have:

A religion based on a written text
A state or political organisation of the usual kind
Sharp class divisions

However, NCERT emphasises that such definitions have important limitations.

CLASSIFICATION OF TRIBES

Tribes can be classified through permanent traits and acquired traits.



ACQUIRED TRAITS

Classification according to acquired traits mainly uses:

1. Mode of livelihood

Tribes may be associated with:

-  - Fishing
-  - Food gathering and hunting
-  - Shifting cultivation
-  - Peasant agriculture
-  - Plantation and industrial work

2. Extent of incorporation into Hindu society

Tribes may differ in their degree of assimilation into Hindu society. From the tribal perspective, attitudes towards Hindu society can range from acceptance to resistance. From the mainstream perspective, tribes have historically been assigned different social statuses.

IDEOLOGY OF TRIBALISM

During the 1960s, sociologists debated whether tribes were:

A continuum with caste-based peasant society, or
A fundamentally different type of community.

One argument viewed tribes as less stratified and more community-oriented. Another emphasised that tribes lacked the purity-pollution principle central to caste.

By the 1970s, major definitions of tribe were increasingly criticised because distinctions based on size, isolation, religion and livelihood did not hold consistently.

Tribalism

Tribes should not simply be understood as untouched or “primitive” societies. Interaction with states and mainstream societies contributed to the development of an ideology of tribalism. Tribal groups began defining themselves as tribal in order to distinguish themselves from newly encountered others.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT VS TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

National Development

Particularly during the Nehruvian era, national development involved:

- Large dams
- Factories
- Mines
- Infrastructure projects.

Key idea:

Development for the mainstream often involved significant economic and social costs for tribal communities. The NCERT specifically discusses land dispossession, forest loss, dams, mining and migration in this context.

Impact on tribal communities

Tribal areas were often rich in minerals and forests. Tribals therefore paid a disproportionate price for national development.

Major consequences included:

- Dispossession of land
- Loss of forests
- Displacement
- Pressure from mining and industrial projects
- Disruption of community-based ownership
- In-migration of non-tribal populations

COLONIAL PERIOD AND TRIBAL SOCIETY

Forest resources were systematically exploited during the British period. The colonial economy brought tribal communities into deeper contact with the wider market and mainstream society. Forest exploitation, resource extraction and recruitment of cheap labour affected tribal livelihoods. Tribal communities therefore cannot accurately be described as societies that remained completely isolated from wider economic and political processes.

TRIBAL IDENTITY: POST-COLONIAL TO MODERN

POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

After Independence, the exploitation of forests and resources continued in different forms. Development projects such as dams, mines and factories affected tribal land and livelihoods.

Community-based forms of collective ownership faced disadvantages with the spread of private property. In-migration into tribal areas also affected demographic and cultural patterns.

TRIBAL IDENTITY TODAY

Tribal identities today are shaped by interaction with the mainstream rather than by some unchanged or primordial characteristic. Because this interaction has often taken place on unequal terms, tribal identities frequently involve resistance and opposition to non-tribal domination.

Major developments:
Achievement of statehood, such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, reflects successful struggles for tribal political recognition.

An educated tribal middle class has emerged. Education and reservation have contributed to an increasingly urbanised professional class. Tribal societies themselves have become internally differentiated.

Major bases of tribal movements

1. Economic resources

Land
Forests
Other vital resources

2. Ethnic-cultural identity

Culture
Tradition
Livelihood
Recognition and identity

FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Family is an important social institution. It is connected with other social institutions and structures, including: Political, Economic, Cultural, Educational.

Family can be classified according to: Size, Residence, Inheritance/descent, Authority.

CLASSIFICATION OF FAMILY: According to Size

Nuclear Family

Consists of one set of parents and their children.

Extended Family

Contains more than one couple, often involving more than two generations living together. The extended family is commonly called the joint family.



NCERT makes an important point: the extended/joint family should not simply be treated as the universal or historically dominant Indian family form. It was confined to particular sections and regions.

CLASSIFICATION OF FAMILY: According to Residence

Matrilocal

After marriage, the newly married couple lives with the woman's parents.

Patrilocal

After marriage, the couple lives with the man's parents.

FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Classification According to Inheritance and Authority

ACCORDING TO INHERITANCE / DESCENT

Matrilineal: Property passes through the mother's line. In the NCERT formulation, matrilineal societies pass property from mother to daughter.

Patrilineal: Property passes through the father's line. Traditionally, property passes from father to son.

PATRIARCHY AND MATRIARCHY

Patriarchy: A family structure in which men exercise authority and dominance.

Matriarchy: A theoretical concept in which women exercise dominance.

IMPORTANT NCERT POINT



There is no historical or anthropological evidence of matriarchy in the sense of societies where women exercise overall dominance.

Therefore: Matrilineal $\neq$ Matriarchal. A society can be matrilineal without being matriarchal.

MATRILINY vs MATRIARCHY

MATRILINY	MATRIARCHY
Refers to inheritance/descent through the mother's line	Refers to women's dominance/authority
Property may pass from mother to daughter	Women are theoretically dominant
Does not necessarily mean women control property	Implies female dominance
Exists empirically	NCERT describes it as a theoretical rather than empirical concept

Most important line: Matrilineal societies exist, but this does not mean that women necessarily exercise control over property or decision-making.

MCQs

Q1. The English word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word casta, which means:

- (a) Colour
- (b) Pure breed
- (c) Community
- (d) Occupation

Q2. Which of the following refers to the four-fold division of society into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra?

- (a) Jati
- (b) Varna
- (c) Tribe
- (d) Clan

Q3. Which of the following is a defining feature of the caste system?

- (a) Exogamy
- (b) Endogamy
- (c) Complete occupational freedom
- (d) Absence of hierarchy

Q4. The concept of Sanskritisation was introduced by:

- (a) G.S. Ghurye
- (b) A.R. Desai
- (c) M.N. Srinivas
- (d) D.P. Mukerji

MCQs (Continued)

Q5. A dominant caste is generally characterised by:

- (a) Small population and low economic power
- (b) Numerical strength and considerable economic and political power
- (c) Complete absence from local politics
- (d) Dependence only on ritual status

Q6. Which of the following refers to descent and inheritance through the mother's line?

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| (a) Patriarchy | (c) Matriliney |
| (b) Patriliney | (d) Matriarchy |

Q7. Which of the following correctly distinguishes matriliney from matriarchy?

- (a) Matriliney refers to female political domination, while matriarchy refers to descent through the female line.
- (b) Matriliney refers to descent and inheritance through the female line, while matriarchy refers to authority being vested in women.
- (c) Both terms have exactly the same meaning.
- (d) Matriliney refers to residence with the mother, while matriarchy refers to residence with the father.

Answer Key

- 1. – (b)
- 2. – (b)
- 3. – (b)
- 4. – (c)
- 5. – (b)
- 6. – (c)
- 7. – (b)

Important Questions with Answers

Q1. What is the relationship between varna and jati?

Answer: Varna and jati are two distinct terms used in Indian languages to refer to the institution of caste. Varna literally means 'colour' and refers to the four-fold division of society into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Jati is a generic term meaning species or kinds and is commonly used to refer to the numerous local and regional caste groups. Varna is generally understood as a broad, all-India classification, while jati refers to a much more complex and region-specific system.

Q2. Explain the two principles on which the caste system is based.

Answer: The caste system can be understood through two sets of principles: separation and difference, and wholism and hierarchy. Castes are separated from one another through rules relating to marriage, food sharing, social interaction and occupation. At the same time, individual castes are not treated as completely independent groups; they form part of a larger social system arranged in a hierarchical order.

Q3. What were the major changes brought about by colonialism in the caste system?

Answer: Colonialism brought important changes in the caste system. The British administration tried to understand and classify caste in order to govern India. Census and official classifications gave caste categories a more rigid administrative form. Colonial policies also introduced new ways of defining and recording caste groups. Thus, colonialism did not simply preserve the existing caste system; it also contributed to its reorganisation and institutionalisation in new forms.

Important Questions with Answers (Continued)

Q4. What is Sanskritisation?

Answer: Sanskritisation, a concept associated with M.N. Srinivas, refers to a process through which members of a usually middle or lower caste attempt to raise their social status by adopting the ritual, domestic and social practices of a caste or castes of higher status. It represents a form of social mobility in which a caste seeks to improve its position within the existing social hierarchy.

Q5. What is meant by the term dominant caste?

Answer: The term dominant caste, associated with M.N. Srinivas, refers to castes that have a large population and have acquired considerable economic and political power, particularly through land rights and their position in the rural economy. After Independence, partial land reforms transferred land rights from some former upper-caste absentee landlords to intermediate castes. Their numerical strength, economic resources and political influence enabled them to become dominant in many regions. Examples include Yadavs, Jats, Vokkaligas, Reddys, Khammas, Marathas and Patidars.

Q6. How have tribal communities been classified?

Answer: Tribal communities have been classified using both permanent traits and acquired traits. Permanent traits include factors such as region, language, physical characteristics and ecological habitat. Acquired traits are related mainly to the mode of livelihood and the extent of incorporation into Hindu society. These classifications show that tribal communities are diverse rather than forming one uniform social category.

Q7. Why is the idea that tribes are simply 'primitive communities living isolated lives' problematic?

Answer: The idea is problematic because tribal communities have never existed in complete isolation from wider society. Tribal groups have had different kinds of economic, political and cultural interactions with non-tribal populations. Their relationships with neighbouring communities, markets, states and other social groups have changed over time. Therefore, tribes should not be understood as static or isolated communities; they have experienced continuity as well as considerable change.