
UNIT 11 CLASS, POWER AND INEQUALITY

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the relevance and meaning of class;
- discuss the relationship between class, power and inequality;
- provide an overview of class structure and economic inequality in India, both in the agrarian and urban contexts; and
- spell out the shifts and continuities in the analysis and understanding of class in the Indian context.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

India has predominantly been reckoned as a caste society in popular thinking and academic circles. To perceive India however, only through the windows of caste is incomplete. Class is yet another significant axis to capture divisions and inequality underlying Indian social reality is spelt out in the Section 11.2.

The following two sections indicate India as a class society. The focus is on reading of class structure and class relations in both rural and urban India.

The Section 11.5 is on the dominant class, and the extent to which it exercises power and influence on the state, amidst electoral democracy, contributing to the reproduction of class- based inequalities of income and wealth.

* Contributed by Kanika Kakar, Delhi University

11.2 UNDERSTANDING CLASS: RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Indian society is a highly stratified society. There are multiple axes which contribute to divisions and hierarchy in Indian society; caste and class being the fundamental. The general tendency has been to read India typically as a caste society. However, class is a significant basis to power and inequality in Indian society and hence, requires reflection.

Class is a system of stratification that is economic in character unlike caste, which is about ritual ordering of society. A class is based on the criteria like occupation, landownership, marketable yield or disposable income and social capital. The crucial aspect is all these criteria are directly convertible into money. Therefore, money or wealth is central in class stratification. However, contrary to caste, class system is flexible and less rigid. While caste status is endowed at birth and hereditarily ascribed, class status is based on money or wealth, acquired or achieved by an individual.

The significance of class vis-à-vis caste as a basis to stratification and ranking in Indian society is recent. In traditional India occupational status stood in distinction from class through the prevalence of *jajmani* system. The *jajmani* system of traditional occupational obligations/patron-client ties showed overlaps with the caste ranking and entailed individuals inheriting their occupational status. The constitutional provisions challenging caste-based rigidities, introduction of land reforms, industrialisation, spread of education, monetisation of economy and feasibility of market transaction owing to the availability of modern transport have led to gradual erosion of practices like *jajmani*. In present context individuals are more-or-less free to choose their occupations, independent of their caste, in accordance to their educational qualifications and skills. Andre Beteille's work (1966) on Sripuram village reflects well that new forces are disrupting the traditional pattern of social stratification and producing economic/class and political systems that no longer entirely depend on caste. A person's superior caste status necessarily does not indicate his economically and politically dominant position. However, while systems like *jajmani* have weakened and the association of occupation with caste has lessened, it has not completely disappeared. There are still prevailing occupations associated with certain castes. There are many agricultural labours and those engaged in the sanitation work tend to be from lower castes, as some of the higher paying occupations are associated with upper castes.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces
 - a) of traditional occupational obligations/patron-client ties.
 - b) A person's caste status is fixed at birth and hereditarily ascribed, unlike his class status which is flexible as is based on wealth/income and.....
 - c) The significance ofas a basis to stratification and ranking in Indian society is recent.

11.3 AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE AND CLASS RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This section provides a historical perspective on the agrarian and inequality, focusing on the colonial and nationalist responses post independence agrarian reforms & class structure.

11.3.1 Colonial Land Policy and Agrarian Inequality

Scholarly works indicate that class-based inequality and hierarchies prevalent in agrarian society in the post independence India are an outcome of the colonial government's policies and practices. P.C. Joshi (1967) pointed out that agrarian policy that India had in pre-mutiny period reflected the colonial government's political interest rather than scientific-intellectual understanding of the subject.

The *Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture* that was appointed in 1928 was in continuity with a number of official pre-mutiny documents published by the Famine Commission, merely showing lip sympathy to the agrarian problem. It omitted crucial areas of landownership, land tenancy, and assessment of land revenue and irrigation charges.

The colonial state's land and agrarian policy underlay capitalist and extortionist tendencies, which were visible in:

First, the high tax demand that the colonial state made on agriculture as a part of the 'zamindari' and 'ryotwari' settlement systems. Contrary to British claims its actual land revenue collections were generally higher than those under the traditional indigenous rulers.

Box 1: Zamindari and Ryotwari Settlements

The Zamindari settlement system entailed the colonial state entering into permanent settlements with *zamindars* fixing the land revenue rates at a very high level. The *zamindar* was the intermediary between the state and the direct cultivator paying fixed land revenue to the state while he collected rent from the actual producers. However, since land revenue was fixed, the colonial state discovered that it was not able to match up the rise in agricultural income that occurred over time. The surplus in income was being largely appropriated by the intermediaries.

Consequently, the colonial government shifted to the Ryotwari system of temporary settlements made directly with the peasant, or *ryot*. This entailed periodic revision pushing the revenue rates up to the maximum limit the economy or polity could bear.

Second, during the colonial rule absentee landlordism and subinfeudation was rampant. This implied peasants paying high rents to sustain series of intermediaries between themselves and the state. In addition to the rent demand, the landlords resorted to numerous illegal exactions in cash, kind or labour (*begar*), which put a severe burden on the peasant.

Under the above context, the large landowners found it more profitable to give out their land on tenancy, extracting very high rents and other illegal dues from

landless peasants; instead of adopting large-scale capital intensive agriculture practices. It was therefore, the colonial land policy, not because of any allegedly inherent 'feudal' mentality of the agrarian classes that capitalist agriculture did not emerge.

Third, the heavy taxation on the peasantry by the colonial state and dominant sections led to its extreme indebtedness to private moneylenders and landlords. Consequently, bonded labour became a common feature in large parts of the country.

Thus, during the colonial period the bulk of the Indian peasantry was drained of resources and was living close to below subsistence level. The upper sections of rural society found rent and usury more profitable source of income than capitalist agriculture. As a result they took little interest in modernising and improving agriculture. Further, the colonial state too did not invest of what it extorted from agriculture. Indian agriculture therefore remained backward.

Box 2: Women's Economic Subordination in Agrarian India: A Colonial Legacy

The colonial intervention in the agrarian economy strengthened the dominant landowning classes aggravating oppression of the majority of rural women by exacerbating patriarchal practices as distress sales of daughters, harassment of women tenants and increase in the regulatory power of class-based marriage norms and sexual morality. Further, the colonial rule vested individual land rights in the hands of men reinforcing women's exclusion from ownership of the means of production prevalent in pre-colonial agrarian structure; where matrilineal systems did exist they were slowly transformed into patrilineal patterns of succession.

In post-independent India land/property rights are still elusive for most rural and urban women, despite, the enactment of Hindu Succession Amendment Act of 2005 ensuring equal inheritance rights for both men and women. In reality few women inherit family property and forfeit their rights to it for their brother.

11.3.2 Nationalist Approach: A Response to Colonial Policy

Since the late nineteenth century the nationalists had been critical of the backwardness of Indian agriculture under colonialism. They outrightly contested and rejected colonial theory of land control, including revenue system in particular arguing for change in the oppressive landlord-tenant relationship and high land revenue collected by the colonial state. The early nationalists, Justice Ranade and R.C. Dutta questioned the colonial state for overlooking the institutional structure, namely, the traditional land relations, which had a direct bearing on economic backwardness and required drastic state intervention for restructuring. Although Ranade and Dutta criticised the colonial state for rural poverty and economic backwardness but they failed to suggest adequate measures for improving the land status of the village people.

Unlike their predecessors the later nationalists provided more significant basis to resolve agrarian inequality. Ambedkar thus through his anti-Khoti movement not only opposed the colonial state but upper caste dominated landlordism by

introducing a bill calling for its abolition. The Britishers had introduced the Khoti system of land tenure in the Konkan region to collect tax by granting huge power to powerful persons (Khots) of a locality. They invariably, resorted to brutal and violent means to collect tax.

The fight against agrarian inequality was to get closely intertwined with the national movement against colonial rule towards the twentieth century. Much of the agrarian reforms that were introduced in post independent India were a part of nationalists' campaign against oppressive colonial policies towards the agrarian society. Thus, the Civil Disobedience campaign (1930-40) launched by Mahatma Gandhi took on the form of no-tax and no-rent campaigns in many parts of the country. Mahatma Gandhi's concern for the peasantry further comes forth explicitly from his remark, 'land and all property is his who will work it' made in the late 1930s. This was synonymous with the notion of "land to the tiller" which was fundamental to post independence agrarian reforms. The Karachi session, 1931 of Indian National Congress spelt out Economic Programme focusing on the fundamental rights of peasantry that it wished to introduce in independent India. A series of Kisan Conferences were organised in the third decade of the twentieth century alongside Congress sessions reiterating the demand for agrarian reform. Gathering strength and support from the nationalist movement, peasant struggle against agrarian inequality intensified and took shape of militant anti-landlord movements demanding abolition of *zamindari* settlement system in various parts of the country in the 1930-40s.

Activity 1

The Telangana and the Tebhaga peasant protests underlay opposition to class and economic inequities introduced by the dominant agrarian class at the behest of the colonial rule creating a base for the post independence agrarian reforms. Elaborate in two pages.

11.3.3 Post Independence: Agrarian Reforms and Class Structure

a) Agrarian Reforms: Provisions and Implications

After independence, the Congress government appointed the Agrarian Reforms Committee under the chairmanship of J.C. Kumarappa, based on the recommendations of which the following land reforms were introduced in the post independent India that were crucial for challenging rural economic inequalities:

- i) The *Zamindari* Abolition Act, 1950 was the foremost post independence agrarian reform. However, this Act could be implemented in its true spirit only after the government issued First Amendment Act in 1951, added articles 31(a), 31 (b) and Ninth Schedule to the Constitution, which led to dropping of the right to property from the list of fundamental rights. The amendment and additions empowered the state to acquire any land or estate.
- ii) The *Zamindari* Abolition Act also declared *begari*/ bonded labour as a punishable offence.
- iii) The legislation for the abolition of intermediary tenures between the state and the tiller laying out land to the actual tillers of the soil was enacted in 1950 and reinforced by the second Five Year Plan. The legislation prohibited

subletting/leasing of land except by widows, minors and other disabled persons. Provisions were made for protection of the sharecroppers and other tenants from forcible and illegal eviction by landowner.

- iv) The land ceiling act was enacted in 1960s to legally stipulate maximum size beyond which no individual farmer or farm household could hold any land for ensuring equitable distribution of income and property.
- v) The idea of collective farming for the development of reclaimed waste lands on which landless labourers could be employed was encouraged.

The land reforms introduced after independence however, further led to the concentration of land in the hands of the large landowners. The fundamental provision, “land to the tiller” was subverted by large landowners who to a large extent got evicted long-term tenants prior to the enactment of the legislation. Further, the basic objectives of the Land Ceiling Act were largely defeated by the big landlords and other vested interests through fictitious divisions of land, mere paper entries in the records through the *benami* transaction or fake ownership of holdings, fraudulent means adopted in the distribution of land to the landless and poor peasants, conflict with the law of inheritance and illiteracy of the peasants.

Also, ideas like joint-farming met with little success as were practised as a convenient method to by-pass land reforms by the privileged classes and garnering facilities as loans from government agencies.

Mencher (2002: 216-17) points out that the state has shifted its focus from land redistribution to increasing ‘efficiency’ of agriculture. The growing corporatisation and commercialisation of agriculture led to land consolidation, introduction of capital intensive farming techniques, mono-cropping and export crop production. This has made medium and small farmers and landless agricultural labours unemployed and driven them to a state of abjection. The capital intensive agriculture and its implications in heightening of rural inequalities first became visible with the introduction of Green Revolution by the Indian state in 1960s. The Green Revolution entailed introducing modern methods and technology such as high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, tractors, irrigation facilities, pesticides and fertilizers. This required heavy investments and could be afforded only by the large landholders and rich farmers. According to P.C. Joshi (1974), in Punjab and Haryana the trend that emerged was that small landowners rented their land to big farmers who needed a larger land spread to use their machinery profitably. This while enriched the large landowners; it pushed the landless workers into misery and unemployment.

Activity 2

Increase in number of farmers committing suicide in India is a reflection of agrarian class inequalities and state failure to address rural poverty. Note down your views on the issue in your note book.

b) *Agrarian Class Structure and Class Relations*

The agrarian social structure varies regionally. Every region has diverse groups and classes that occupy certain positions in order to control and manage the

affairs of the land. A.R. Desai and Daniel Thorner are prominent scholars to have constructed general frameworks for classifying agrarian classes found in post independence India. These frameworks reflect hierarchies of income and wealth/property in agrarian society, throwing light on prevailing economic inequality. The land reforms, emergence of cooperatives and credit societies failed to reduce the power of the landlords as seen in the earlier section.

A.R. Desai (1959) enumerates the most popular conceptions of agrarian social structure as consisting of four classes: the three classes in the agricultural field (categories of cultivators) are constituted by land- owners, tenants, and labourers, while the fourth class is of non-agricultur-ists.

Daniel Thorner (1956) rejected the above classification of cultivators as landlords, tenants, and labourers. In his view the same man can belong simultaneously to these categories. A person can himself cultivate a few acres of land he owns, give some land on rent, and in emergency may work on other's field as labourer. He has analysed agrarian relations by using three specific terms:

- *Malik* for agricultural landlords,
- *Kisan* for working peasants (including tenants) with inferior rights in land than *maliks* and
- *Mazdoor* for agricultural labourers who work on others lands/plot.

He has arrived at this categorisation using the following criteria:

- i) Type of income obtained from land as rent or fruits of own cultivation or wages.
- ii) The nature of rights may vary as derived from proprietary and ownership or tenancy or sharecropping claims.
- iii) The extent of fieldwork actually performed. There may be those who do not work at all (absentee), those who perform partial work, actual cultivators doing total work with family labour, those who work for others and earn wages.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) How do early nationalists critique the colonial agrarian policy? (Elaborate in 3 sentences)

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- ii) Green Revolution contributed to increase disparities in agrarian India. Discuss (Explain in a sentence)

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iii) Enumerate Daniel Thorner's classification of agrarian classes.

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11.4 CLASS DIFFERENCES IN URBAN INDIA

Class inequality and differentiation of income and wealth is a phenomenon true not only to agrarian India. Occupation and income based distinctions are evident in urban areas as rural counterparts. Thus, the economic distinctions and hierarchical positioning exemplified by capitalists and working class in industries of urban India show a considerable overlap with that of landlords and landless labourers in agrarian society. This reinforces the universalistic character of class-based distinctions and variations exempting us from the need for making a detailed elaboration on urban classes. However, unlike agrarian classes, classes in urban areas derive income from engagement in non-agricultural employment. Consequently, a brief overview of social classes in urban context is necessary.

11.4.1 Types of Social Classes

Broadly, following social classes are typical to urban India:

Industrial Capitalist Class : This class grew during the colonial rule out of the pre-existing mercantile class. Economically and socially it is the strongest. After independence, the major fields like agriculture, industry and trade were left to the private individuals. The creation of infrastructure and establishment of heavy industries were taken off by the state sector. This type of economy led to a phenomenal rise in the number of industries owned and controlled by the capitalists. Industrial business houses like the Tata and Birla showing concentration of assets, resources emerged post independence. Profit seeking and capital accumulation is the primary goal of this class. As a result of its economic position this class exercises a significant influence on state as is examined in the following section.

White Collar Working Class: The class is constituted by all those engaged in administrative, managerial and other service related works. The professionals, managers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, bureaucrats are white collar workers. In short, the white collar working class is that of non-manual and mental workers. The educational qualifications and technical competence and expertise of the members of white collar class make them a part of skilled workforce in urban India. This class receives a salary for work and is economically well-off for its members may be a part of upper and middle brackets of income hierarchy.

This class started emerging during British rule as there was an expansion of modern industry, agriculture, commerce, finance, administration, press and other fields of social life. Rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation in

post-independent India further created large-scale employment opportunities in industries, trade and commerce, construction, transport and service etc. Similarly, the post independent state created a massive institutional set-up comprising a complex bureaucratic structure throughout the length and breadth of the country. The white collar class hardly constitutes a homogeneous category. Within this non-proprietary class of non-manual workers, a deep hierarchy exists. There are some high paid cadres at the top, representing upper and middle brackets of income hierarchy and low paid at the bottom that have not crystallised into a well-defined middle class. They differ in their style of life as well.

Small Entrepreneurs: This class consists of, petty businessmen, traders and shop keepers. It has developed with the growth of modern cities and towns. It constitutes the link between the producers of goods and commodities and the mass of consumers. Its members make their living on the profit margin of the process on which they buy and sell their goods. The unprecedented growth of cities in the post independent India has stimulated a large-scale growth of this class. The growing urban population creates demands for various kinds of needs and services. Petty shop-keeping, enterprises and trading caters to these needs. The bulk of city dwellers and rural migrants who lack adequate educational qualification, and hence the entry to the organised sector is closed to them set up small-scale production units or petty businesses. The scale of these is generally small, requiring minimal capital investment. Most of these units and businesses are run as home-based enterprises.

Working Class: The working class in urban India is constituted by manual and blue-collar workers performing semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. The working class sell their labour power in discrete amounts of time or output in return of a wage. The working class comprises those who are in an entirely subordinate role. It emerged during British rule in India as a result of setting up of modern industries, railways and plantations. It was formed predominantly out of the pauperised peasants and ruined artisans. Like all other classes in post independent India the working class has grown in volume. The members of working class are distributed in different parts and different sectors of the industry. A large part of this class is constituted by the workers in the unorganised sector. Thus, it is heterogeneous and diverse.



Unionisation goes a long way in the fight for worker's rights. (Pic credit: radicalnotes.org)

The diversity in the working class is due to a complex set of relations in the different sectors of urban employment. In the post independent India, the government's attitude towards the industrial working class has been considerably favourable. Several acts and provisions were instituted by the government granting some facilities to the workers. Trade union movements have taken place in independent India. However, the workers in the unorganised sector who work as invisible labour in home-based industry in the absence of adequate government support, continue to live on the margins of society. They get low wages and are denied the benefits of the organised labour force. The process of economic liberalisation and globalisation has added to their state of abjection.

Box 3: Class Differences and Female Work-Force Participation in Urban India

The post-independence India is marked by growing industrialisation and urbanisation with which emerged new contexts of marginalisation and exploitation of women. For the upper and middle class women it signals emergence into a different kind of economic sphere-the service sector, professions etc., into which they will have to face the challenges of patriarchy. Notwithstanding is their poor participation in these spheres and constitution of female work-force, premised on the separation of public/masculine from private/feminine spheres.

For poor women urban contexts imply move into modern industrialised sector indicating the emergence of new forms of challenges visible in the form of conditions of industrialisation (unequal wages, migration and housing), along with the attendant patriarchal practices. Also, visible is ready absorption in informal sector of urban milieu as domestic-workers and labour in home-based industry.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces:

- a) The working class in urban India is constituted by.....
- b) The..... are white collar workers.
- c) The class of has developed with the growth of modern cities and towns.

11.5 THE DOMINANT CLASS MODEL: INEQUALITY AND CHANGE

There are scholarly writings which indicate that post independent India is marked by the dominance of three classes. Their occupational positioning, ownership of land and income/wealth give them a significant clout and basis to exercise power over the masses. Often, these groups come in nexus with the state and garner all the development benefits robbing the masses of development gains that the latter sets for them. However, onset of globalisation marks a paradigm shift in economic practises, which along with electoral democracy makes it imperative for state/ government to take care of the interests of the marginalised groups.

11.5.1 Conceptual Framework

Reviewing the planned economic development in India in the first three decades since Independence, Bardhan in *The Political Economy of Development*, (1984) identified three dominant proprietary classes as the industrial capitalists, agrarian capitalists/rich farmers and the professionals consisting of the civil and military bureaucracy and white-collar workers of all kinds, which have played a significant influence on the scope and nature of state policy. These three classes form the ruling bloc in India. They protect and promote their own interests by using the state.

Nevertheless, the role of the state has been significant. It is an autonomous entity exercising not only political and legal powers but controls a substantial share of economic resources. The state has ownership of large public sector undertakings, control over the private manufacturing sector through the regime of licensing and the allocation of credit. However, the dominant classes constantly manipulated and garnered the benefits from the policies and programmes of the state. They drained the resources of the state, which led to a gradual decline in both public and private investment in the economy and consequently slowed down the growth. Fulfilling their vested interests the dominant classes thus, make it virtually impossible for the state to take measures for the development of the masses. They have created a passive revolution of capitalism, displacing the poor. The persistence of mass poverty, inequality of income and unequal distribution of resources is explainable in terms of their strength and their nexus with the state.

A New Conceptual Framework: Continuity and Shift

Towards the 1990s, according to Partha Chatterjee, the onset of globalisation and transformations in state's economic practices led to some changes in the structure and dynamics of passive revolution.

Box 4: Passive Revolution

The Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of passive revolution in *Prison Notebooks*. It relates to elite-engineered socio-political reform in the state that strengthens the dominant classes by reinforcing political economy of capitalism.

Sudipta Kaviraj (1988) and Partha Chatterjee (2008) have deployed the concept to understand state formation and the manoeuvres and strategies of dominant classes in the post colonial India.

The weakening of licence regime, easier flow of foreign capital and consumer goods with changes in the state fiscal policy and opening of public sectors like telecommunications, transport and banking to private players led to modifications in the framework of class dominance.

In the changed scenario along with the traditional business houses, the MNCs and TNCs were to constitute the capitalist class. Further, there has been a distinct ascendancy of corporate capitalist class as compared to the landed elite. The autonomy of state in relation to the class of capitalist has become questionable as there is a growing competition between state governments to woo capitalist investment, both domestic and foreign. All this reflects the success of the passive revolution of capitalism, although in its renewed form.

However, along with corporate capital is the huge sphere of non-corporate capital including the peasantry and those who are a part of the informal sector, which is increasingly getting marginalised with the intensification in state's focus on capitalist economic growth. The passive revolution under conditions of electoral democracy makes it unacceptable and illegitimate for the government to leave marginalised population to fend for themselves. This carries the risk of turning them into "dangerous classes". Hence, a whole series of governmental policies are devised to reverse the effects of growing capitalism. In short, the marginalised classes have to be fed, clothed and given work which is the difficult and innovative process of politics on which the future of passive revolution under conditions of democracy depends.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Who constituted the dominant class in the early decades of post independence India. (State in 1 sentence)

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- ii) Briefly spell out the reasons which have attributed to change and modification in the dominant class framework.

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11.6 LET US SUM UP

The unit has reflected on the institution of class and the resultant economic hierarchies and divisions in Indian social reality. A review has been made of class-based inequalities in rural and urban contexts. Class-based inequality may be understood in terms of distinctions in income and wealth that is closely connected to a person's occupational status in the present context.

In the contemporary Indian context along with caste, class has emerged as a strong force to reckon with. The close association between class status and political power and the concept of dominant class illustrate the point. However, though class status has become a significant basis to exercise power and control in the wake of electoral democracy the marginalised groups and lower classes cannot be overlooked.

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11.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces:
 - a) *Jajmani* is a system of traditional occupational obligations/patron-client ties.
 - b) A person's caste status is fixed at birth and hereditarily ascribed, unlike his class status which is flexible as is based on wealth/income and may be achieved.
 - c) The significance of class vis-à-vis caste as a basis to stratification and ranking in Indian society is recent.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) How do early nationalists critique the colonial agrarian policy? (Elaborate in 3 sentences)

Since the late nineteenth century the early nationalists had been critical of the colonial policy of land including the oppressive revenue system. Both Justice Ranade and R.C. Dutta questioned the colonial state for overlooking the institutional structure, namely, the traditional land relations, which had a direct bearing on economic backwardness and required drastic state intervention for restructuring. However, unlike the later nationalists they could not suggest adequate measures for resolving agrarian inequality.

- ii) The Green revolution contributed to increase disparities in agrarian India. (Explain in 1 sentence)

The Green Revolution entailed introduction of capital intensive agriculture methods and techniques and hence, benefitted only the large landholders and rich farmers leading to increase in disparities in agrarian India.

- iii) Enumerate Daniel Thorner's classification of agrarian classes.

Daniel Thorner has analysed agrarian relations by using three specific terms: *Malik* for agricultural landlords, *Kisan* for working peasants (including tenants), and *Mazdoor* for agricultural labourers.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces:
- The working class in urban India is constituted by workers performing manual and blue-collar jobs.
 - The professionals, managers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, bureaucrats are white collar workers.
 - The class of small entrepreneurs has developed with the growth of modern cities and towns.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Who constituted the dominant class in the early decades of post independence India? (State in 1 sentence)

Bardhan in *The Political Economy of Development*, (1984) identified the industrial capitalists, agrarian capitalists/rich farmers and the professionals consisting of the civil and military bureaucracy and white-collar workers as the three dominant classes in post independence India.

- ii) Briefly spell out the reasons which have attributed to change and modification in the dominant class framework.

The weakening of licence regime, easier flow of foreign capital and consumer goods with changes in the state fiscal policy and opening of some of sectors like telecommunications, transport and banking to private players have led to modifications in the earlier framework of class dominance.

- iii) The notion of Passive Revolution may also be added.

Unit 12 Resistance and Protest^{*}

Structure

12.0 Objectives

12.1 Introduction

12.2 Caste: Characteristic of Indian Society

12.2.1 Caste and the Ideology of Hierarchy

12.3 Early Critiques and Struggles

12.3.1 Feminist Crusade against the Patriarchy: Rambai, Tarabai and Beyond

12.3.2 Contributions of Phule and Ambedkar: Dalits' Fight against caste Oppression

12.4. The New Social Movements and the Caste Question

12.5 Lets Sum Up

12.6 Key Words

12.7 Further Readings

12.8 Specimen Answers

12.0 Objectives

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- elaborate that caste practices and rituals have met with strong resistance and protest;
- understand that culture of resistance and protest at the intellectual and religious level ;
- Discuss subaltern perspectives on caste.

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12.1 Introduction

There is a common perception regarding Hinduism subscribed by its adherents that relates essentially to its pluralistic content and tolerant tradition. This portrayal of Hinduism as a template for tolerance glosses over its most divisive element — caste and silences the struggles and protests launched by those outside the Hindu framework. To regard India in the context of single-system of Hindu conception of social order is therefore inadequate. The resistance and protests launched by non-Hindu and non-Brahmanical forces makes it necessary to relate theory of social structure with the idea of change. They bring into questioning the functional presuppositions of social system/caste system (Singh, Yogendra 1986:66) and the dominant idea that India is a nation of Hindus.

Caste system imposes hierarchy on the Indian social structure. The section 12.2 introduces caste and the ideology of hierarchy. It enumerates that the hierarchal social order is based on the idea of continual privileging of Brahmanism focusing on the *varna* order.

The oppressive core of Indian social structure however, has not gone unchallenged. Within India and Hindu civilization the resistance and protests by non-Hindu and non-Brahmanical elements cannot be overlooked. The religions, Buddhism and Jainism had risen opposing dogmatic and ritualistic way of life prescribed by Brahmanism. Many of the medieval saints like Namdev, Guru Nanak and Kabir had condemned the orthodoxies underlying Hinduism. The nineteenth and early twentieth century social reformers further strengthened the tradition of resistance and protest by calling for changes in cultural practices and values of Hinduism based on primordial tradition of Vedas. The initiatives of some of the early social reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar are examined in the section 12.3. These may be regarded as fundamental to laying foundation for multitude of anti-caste resistance and protests in the periods to follow under the umbrella of the new social movements in section 12.4.

12.2 Caste: Characteristic of Indian Society

Caste is the foremost form of stratification in India. The significance of caste is immense that more than anything else that it characterises Indian society. Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the Caste of his parents and in that Caste he inevitably remains. Caste of an individual is

fixed at birth and is hence, unchanging. No accumulation of wealth and no exercise of talents can alter an individual's caste status. The essence of caste lies in the idea of hierarchy. It is the idea hierarchy, which results in the exercise a multiple practices that makes caste an extreme form of inequality. The Brahmans give primacy to the ritually ordained hierarchy to maintain status-quo.

12.2.1 Caste and the Ideology of Hierarchy

Dumont (1989) is the foremost scholar to have written on caste as a system of hierarchy based on inequality. Fundamental to his understanding of hierarchy is division of the Hindu social universe in terms of four fold *varna* order with Brahmans at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras. The Untouchables are the outcaste, and outside the ritual ranking of the *varna* order.(see unit 7,section 7.2 Varna and Caste)

The idea of separation underlies the principle of hierarchy. Each caste seeks to maintain separation from the other to safeguard its position in the hierarchical ordering. The principle of separation is seen to be operative when caste groups are separated and are distinguished from and connected to one another through:

- (a) Separation in matters of marriage and inter-dinning,
- (b) Division of labour observed in occupations and professions, and
- (c) Viewing each other in terms of the principle of hierarchy. In other words, the hierarchically ranked groups see each other and are seen by others as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

Separation is manifest in the twin ideas of pure and impure. Then, the two ideas, purity and impurity are central to defining and understanding caste hierarchy. According to these ideas, the three superior castes maintain their purity by avoiding the caste(s) inferior to it. In the caste hierarchy Brahmins are the priest and literati, Kshatriyas are constituted by warriors and Vaishya are engaged in trading. Shudras are the lowest of all at the bottom of caste ladder and their responsibilities included service to three *Varnas*. Occupation is integral and

determining characteristic of caste. Occupations are fixed since birth i.e. they entail hereditary involvement. Any shift in occupation implies breaching caste norms and tradition. The notion of purity and pollution are central to the practice of untouchability. The superior castes attempt to maintain their ritual purity by avoiding contact with one another and particularly the Shudras. Any exchange with caste lower in social hierarchy may lead to defilement or loss of their ritually superior status. The untouchables are constituted by the group who are forced to take up extremely menial tasks. The superior castes use all possible means to distance themselves from the untouchables as they are thought of as most defiling and polluting. Stringent punishments are imposed on those who breach the caste norms of purity and pollution.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What are the fundamental ideas underlying the principle of separation?

12.3 Early Critiques and Struggles

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grew a strong critique against atrocities of caste system owing to the efforts of social reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Jyotiba Govindrao Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. This has been pivotal in building anti-caste movement(s) and resistance in the country in the post independent India.

The social reformers critiquing the evils of caste system belonged to both upper and lower castes. This was due to the spread of education and general awakening owing to western influence during the period. Many Indians came forward to reform society by purging it from iniquities of caste system. Among the upper castes the contributions of Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde are noteworthy in building a culture of protest and resistance to ills of caste system. The two are regarded as the first feminists in India, exposing the patriarchy and domination of women at the behest of caste system. Their efforts were lauded by Jyotiba Phule, a low caste social reformer who offered one of the most powerful critiques to the brahmanical domination of Hindu society and started a movement against the oppressive practices of upper caste. Another name in the list of low caste crusaders is that of B.R.

Ambedkar, who had experienced the worst form of casteist discrimination during his childhood, and hence, fought against upper caste tyranny throughout his life.

12.3.1 Feminists Crusade against Patriarchy: Ramabai, Tarabai and Beyond

Pandita Rambai and Tarabai Shinde, the two nineteenth century women reformers were pioneers in rendering feminist perspective to activism against Hinduism and caste system. They adopted a completely distinct outlook from the other early reformers of the period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Brahmo Samaj, Dayanand Sarwasti of Arya Samaj and men like Mahatma Gandhi. Both Ramabai and Tarabai, unlike the other reformers did not believe that the present state of degeneration of women could be done away with by returning to idealised versions of Vedas and Upanishads (Omvedt 2001:35). Rather, they saw Hinduism as inherently rooted in casteist and patriarchal excrescences (ibid.). In short, they rejected Hinduism as oppressive.

a) Pandita Ramabai

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati was born on 23 April 1858. She championed women's rights by exposing oppression of Hindu-dominated caste ridden society. Her liberal and egalitarian ideas evoked waves of reaction in the wider world of the English-educated brahman intellectuals.

Pandita Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Samaj, the first autonomous women's organisation to promote women's education and fight the oppression of child marriage. She challenged patriarchal ideals set forth by Hinduism and its fundamental doctrine, caste, both at the level of society and family. The text *The High Caste Hindu Woman* written by her exposes the adversities and oppressive aspects of high caste Hindu women, including child brides and widows. Finding the sanskritic core of Hinduism as essentially anti-woman, she converted to christainity. She provided a critique of the ancient sacred texts, and epics like Dharma Shastras and Puranas for condemning women of both high and low caste as bad and unholy, and therefore, unworthy of salvation.

She was one of the first activists in India to embody a vision of a caste-less and classless and patriarchy-free society (Omvedt 2001:32). Although, she started with a focus on the upper

caste widows her focus was to shift to the outcaste child widows and destitute women after 1896 famine in Maharashtra. She rescued them and set shelter-homes 'Mukti' and 'Sharada Sadan' condemning the core of Hinduism as fundamentally patriarchal.

b) Tarabai Shinde

Tarabai Shinde was born in 1850 in an elite Marathi caste family. She is regarded as the foremost Indian women literary critic questioning the patriarchal setup and stereotypes based on gender. Her work *Stri-Purush Tulna* is a testimony to her crusade against dominant Hinduism and its unjust practices towards women in general and widows in particular. In this work she questions the ideology of *stri dharma*, which Hinduism forces the women to imbibe. In her view this ideology forces women to unquestioningly submit and obey their husbands idealising them as *pativarta*.

Tarabai's work poses an attack to Hindu scriptures (like Ramayana and Mahabharata) in a satirical language, which bears resonance with the folk narrative and story-telling tradition of many working class and peasant women. Expressing her rebellion in a bitter rhetorical attack on the structures of patriarchy, she questioned Hinduism for differently imposing moral dictums on men and women.

c) Moving Beyond the Early Feminists

Drawing inspiration from figures like Ramabai and Tarabai even after the upsurge of Hindu nationalism in late nineteenth century the women's movement had began to take an organised form. In the 1920s All- India Women's Congress and similar women's organisations were formed. However, these were predominantly upper caste and elite organisations, which worked within the dominant Hindu framework speaking of Sita and Savitri as ideals for women, not symbols of male oppression (Omvedt 2001:35). They praised the freedom of the Vedic period, and depicted *purdah* and other evils as resulting from the social conditions of the Muslim invasion (ibid.).

The rural India was to witness much active and radical action as lower class and peasant women reinterpreted dominant Hindu tradition than their urban counterparts. This is evident from the formation of women's front of Oudhian Kisan Sabha, which focused on giving land

rights to women, and attacked male polygamy during the time (ibid.:36). Nonetheless, the reinterpretation of dominant Hinduism by the women's front did not entail its outright rejection. Thus, its members praised both Kaikeyi and Sita as strong-willed women challenging the conventional dictums of Hinduism. The former sent Rama to the jungle on an exile and latter decided to accompany him on it despite her husband urging him otherwise. Yet, as Omvedt (2001: 37) points out that lower class and peasant women were closer to the general attitude of Ramabai and Tarabai. For they took epics and *puranas* as stories and not scriptures reinterpreting these in view of their everyday reality offering a critique to the dominant culture and tradition. The nineteenth century 'kheur', popular folk songs of Bengal on Radha-Krishan and the 'Satyashodhak tamashas' of early twentieth century in Maharashtra are other forms of expression used by lower class and caste women providing rereading of the dominant tradition questioning and challenging it.

Activity 1

There are several folk-genres in different regions of India that reflect a culture of protest and resistance to dominant caste practices and patriarchal tradition. Make a list of such folk-mediums briefly describing them.

12.3.2 Contributions of Phule and Ambedkar: Dalits' Fight against the Caste Oppression

Jyotiba Govindrao Phule and Bhim Rao Ambedkar are two veteran figures among the low castes to launch an attack on the caste and dominant Hindu social order. Both Phule and Ambedkar were visionaries much ahead of their times in seeking to set a casteless society.

a) Jyotiba Phule

Jyotirao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1827 in a 'Mali' caste family. The 'mali' caste traditionally performed the occupation of gardening and occupied low rank in the ritual hierarchy of Hindu social system. People of mali caste belonged to the shudhra varna and were hence, shunned by the Brahmins and upper castes.

Phule was stung by the atrocities and exploitation at the behest of caste system. His low caste status had given him a firsthand experience of the absurdities and injustices in the name of

caste system. He refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth-seeker Society) in 1873 to empower lower castes, untouchables and women. He condemned Vedas and ancient Hindu scriptures as representing the brahmanical world-view and held brahmans as responsible for framing inhuman and exploitative laws to maintain their social superiority and suppress the shudras and ati-shudras.

Phule's fight against brahmanism and dominant Hindu ideology extended to questioning and challenging the patriarchal submission it forced women into. In fact, he had supported the feminism of both Ramabai and Tarabai critiquing the religious ideas and caste rituals that justified women's oppression. Phule was a champion of women's education and set up schools for girls. He took upon the task to educate his wife, Savitri Bai who was an illiterate. He saw the brahmans and the upper caste Hindus as most opposed to the idea of educating their girls. In his view illiterate and uneducated women served to further patriarchal values and tradition in society. He therefore, felt educating lower castes in general and women in particular as the most effective strategy to undermine brahmanical-cultural system and fight social inequality.

b) Bhimrao Ambedkar

Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 in the town and military cantonment of Mhow in the Central Provinces (now in Madhya Pradesh) into a poor low Mahar (dalit) caste family, who were treated as untouchables and subjected to socio-economic discrimination. From his school days he witnessed onslaught of caste on dalits as he and his other untouchable children friends were segregated and given little attention or help by teachers in school. This led him to develop an extremely critical outlook towards the Hindu religion, its caste system and its religious texts.

To empower the untouchables and other religious minorities Ambedkar argued for creating separate electorates and reservations. Drawing support from Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kohlapur, he began the publication of the weekly *Mooknayak (Leader of the Silent)* in 1920 to challenge the negative of caste segregation and untouchability.

Box 12:1 Reservation Policy: Early History

The idea of reservation for the depressed castes and classes in government jobs, along with free and compulsory education for all was first suggested in 1882 by Jotiba Phule before the Hunter Commission. However, it was not accepted by the British government then. Later, in 1902 Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja of Kohlapur drawing inspiration from Phule's struggle against caste introduced 50 percent reservation for non-brahman masses and lower castes under his State jurisdiction Act. This was so far the first the government order to provide reservation to certain sections of society differentiating them on the basis of social, economic and educational backwardness. This was followed by the Government of India, Acts of 1909 and 1919 which offered protection to Muslims with regard share in political and administrative power. The 1932 Poona Pact, between Ambedkar and Gandhi is critical to the history of reservation policy of India. This led Ambedkar accept as a compromise modest reservation of (specified number of) seats for the untouchables in the provincial and central assemblies instead of separate communal electorates for untouchables as guaranteed by the British Prime Minister Mc Donald during the Second Round Table Conference, 1931. Mahatma Gandhi had insisted on ideas like protection of the depressed segments of society from against social and religious persecution and unlike Ambedkar did not see the need for politically privileging them. He thus took fast unto death to protest against separate electorates for the untouchables.

After mid 1920s Ambedkar launched an organised fight against untouchability. He led marches, movements and campaigns to open up public drinking water resources and the right to enter Hindu temples for untouchables. Later, he publicly condemned the classic Hindu text, the Manusmriti for establishing legitimacy of caste system and burnt its copies. In 1936 he published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system. His rejection of Hinduism was founded on the idea of annihilating the caste system, by destroying the religious notions upon which it is premised. He encouraged the depressed castes to leave Hinduism and convert to other religions. He became an ardent follower of Buddhist faith and converted to Buddhism towards the end of his life as it challenged bigotry of Hinduism.

Activity 2

Buddhism has been noted as religion that emerged to challenge to orthodoxies of Hinduism.

Briefly, discuss the main tenets of Buddhism and its critique and resistance to the dominant Hindu tradition.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How was the activism of Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai distinct from early social reformers? (List out in 5-6 sentences)
2. Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces
 - a) Jyotiba Phule refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the to empower lower caste men and women.
 - b) In 1936published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system.

12.4. The New Social Movements and the Caste Question

The 1970s needs to be seen as the turning point in the history of dalit activism. The decade is seen to set the stage for the formation of major and pioneer organisations of New Social Movements (NSM) in India, which began to bring into focus the caste question. The period witnessed appearance of anti-caste activism in the context of the overall crisis of political and economic systems and ideologies. The collapse of state socialist societies envisaged in the Nehruvian model of development implied failure of what had been hitherto the hegemonic ideology of liberation or the primary historical response to the exploitation of the capitalist system. The anti-caste activism was seen to grow during the decade and the subsequent ones', as the low caste and oppressed sections forged alliances with dalits. Even the women, tribal and farmers rallied together and spoke in the Dalit language representing 'Dalit themes'.

Foremost themes to dalit protests and movements launched both at the intellectual and activism level is the tradition of subversion and inversion. Dalit protests and movements offer a cultural critique of old canons of Hinduism and caste order. They are simply not means to resist; but a basis for reconstructing past and rereading Indian social history from the vantage of those at the bottom of caste hierarchy.

There are a series of instances in the history of dalit protests and movements in the independent India, which offer a cultural critique to the dominant Hindu tradition. The new post-1975 women's movement rejected the pre-independence tendency of taking Sita and Savitri as ideals of womanhood, pronouncing Hinduism as patriarchal and oppressive. This rejection of Hinduism by feminists was not unanimous. In late 1980s under the threats from the rising fundamentalism feminists like Madhu Kishwar and Kamla Bhasin focused on evoking powerful role played women as *devis* or goddesses from the mainstream Hinduism. However, during the same period the dalit and low caste women and feminists from south India attempted to re-establish non-Aryan and anti-brahman tradition. A dalit activist, Ruth Manorama founded National Federation of Dalit Women expressing Brahmanism as a fundamental factor underlying women's exploitation and oppression. Flavia Agnes and Razia Patel, minority feminists questioned Hindu hegemony in the women's movement during the National Women's Studies Conference, 1991.

Likewise, in the 1980s the adivasi poet-activist of northern Maharashtra, Waharu Sonavane challenged the control of non-tribals in adivasi-based movements offering a critique to the dominant Aryan tradition (Omvedt 2011: 83). In a similar vein, the environmental movements launched by low castes and peasants incorporated radical themes offering a cultural critique to the dominant Hinduism and the Brahmanical tradition. Sharma (2017) enumerates in southern Bihar the dalits and lower castes involved with water rights on the river Ganga in 1980s and 90s used the symbol of Ekalavya to express their inextricable rooting in their own culture. In Maharashtra many farmer's organisations and mass movements like the Shetkari Sanghatana rejected the dominant tradition and followed Phule by taking Raja Bali as their symbol. In Karnataka Ryat Sangh, a farmer's movement reflected the assertion of dalits taking after the Lohiaite tradition representing the socialist and anti-caste ideals of Ram Manohar Lohia.

The protests and assertions of dalits, low caste, peripheral nationalities and ethnic groups in the contemporary Indian society provide a reflection of the emergence of a new sense of identity among them. These protests and movements assert not only equality for them, but are a means to struggle to bring about revolutionary changes. They not merely rejected the notions of purity-pollution/ impurity and untouchability impounded by dominant Brahmanism, but is a basis for forging a new vision for Indian society, which is different

from that espoused by the higher castes. The very idea of these protests and movements is to carve out an alternative point of view, the ‘subaltern perspective’/ ‘dalit ideology’.

Check Your Progress 4

1. How do dalit protests and movements challenge the dominant caste order.

12.5 Lets Sum Up

In this unit, we saw that caste system manifests oppression and inequality in the Indian society. This has led many dalits and upper caste progressives to aspire for equality and liberation. The cultural critique from the early reformers and dalit activism provides a basis to reinterpret Indian history and tradition from the vantage of non-dominant and oppressed groups of society.

1.7 Key Words

Endogamy: The practice of marrying within one’s own caste.

Hypergamy: The practice whereby a woman marries a man of higher caste or social status than herself.

Hypogamy: The practice whereby a man marries a woman of higher caste or social status than himself.

Patriarchy: system of society in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line. It is coterminous with the idea of exercise of power and control by men.

12. Further Reading

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1.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

Check Your Progress 1

1. The idea of separation is central to understand the principle of hierarchy reflected by caste system. Each caste seeks to maintain separation from the other to safeguard its position in the hierarchical ordering. Separation is observed in matters of marriage, inter-dinning, division of labour reflected in occupations and professions. Fundamental to the idea of separation is the twin concept pure and impure.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Pandita Rambai and Tarabai Shinde, the two nineteenth century women reformers were pioneers in rendering feminist perspective to activism against Hinduism and caste system. They adopted a completely distinct outlook from the other early reformers of the period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Brahmo Samaj, Dayanand Sarwasti of Arya Samaj

and men like Mahatma Gandhi. Both Ramabai and Tarabai, unlike the other reformers did not believe that the present state of degeneration of women could be done away with by returning to idealised versions of Vedas and Upanishads, Rather, they saw Hinduism as inherently rooted in casteist and patriarchal excrescences. In short, they rejected Hinduism as oppressive.

a) Jyotiba Phule refused to tolerate the tyranny and domination of brahmans and upper castes and formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth-seeker Society) in 1873 to empower lower caste men and women.

b) In 1936published a text *Annihilation of Caste*, criticising the orthodox Hindu leaders and caste system.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Dalit protests and movements offer a cultural critique of old canons of Hinduism and caste order. They are simply not means to resist; but a basis for reconstructing past and rereading Indian social history from the vantage of those at the bottom of caste hierarchy. Foremost to dalit protests and movements launched both at the intellectual and activism level is the tradition of subversion and inversion.