
UNIT 2 VILLAGE

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- The term village in general and specifically in terms of Indian context;
- Foundational sources of structural organisation of Indian villages;
- Locating the various social groups within the structure of village as a system; and
- Comprehensive understanding of the village, including structural-functional, through its critique.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss the village structure of Indian society and different dimensions of social groups, gender, religion, natural resources and politics in a village. “In Primitive Society, man is never found alone. The commonest and therefore the most natural condition of men is to live in groups.” (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 170). The question that arises is whether these groups were just aggregates of people or were they linked to each other in specific relations and bonds; or in other words, did these groups have any social structure or were they just aggregates of people. A further enquiry into this matter brings to fore that “social groupings have taken many forms in the course of history. The family is one such social group which is universal and has survived.”(Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 170) Families developed into clans later.

“...Modern Society differs from a primitive one in two respects. Primitive society consisted of nomadic communities while modern society consists of settled communities. Secondly, primitive society consisted of tribal communities based on blood relationship. Modern society consists of local communities based on territorial affiliation.”(Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 7: 273) The relations of such settled groups shifted from blood relationships in the primitive societies to territorial affiliation in the modern societies.

The differences can be summarized in the following table:

Primitive Society	Modern Society
Nomadic communities	Settled communities
Based on blood relationship	Based on territorial affiliation

A question arises why humans left a nomadic life style and became settled in modern societies. According to Ambedkar, this was because the nature of wealth changed. In the primitive society the main wealth was cattle, however, in the modern societies due to developments made in the tools and techniques of farming, land became the main wealth. "... the earliest form of the wealth held by Primitive Society was cattle. Primitive Society became fixed in its abode, in other words became a settled community, when a new species of wealth was discovered. This new species of wealth was land. This happened when Primitive Society learned the art of farming and of cultivating land. Wealth became fixed at one place when it changed its form from cattle to land. With this change Primitive Society also became settled at the same place." (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 7: 274).

Based on the above description, one may argue that the process of becoming sedentary along with the widening of group membership and the emergence of territorial affiliation due to land becoming the main wealth may have resulted in the formation of earliest villages. Although the structures and processes of villages have changed over time, the village remains an important part of the country's agrarian mode of production.

Indian society today is still predominately rural, with a majority of population still living in villages. About 68.8 per cent of India's population is rural, living in 6,40,930 villages (Census of India 2011, Primary Census Abstract).

In this unit we will analyse the village as it appears in the writings and speeches of Ambedkar.

2.2 DEFINING VILLAGE

A village has been defined as an organised system of social relationships (Ritzer 2005: 16) or as the abstraction from the concrete population and its behaviour - the pattern or network (or 'system') of relationships existing between actors and in their capacity of playing roles to one another (Nadel 1969: 5).

The term originated in late Middle English from Old French whose root was the Latin word villa (country house). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a village as "a group of houses and associated buildings, larger than a hamlet and smaller than a town, situated in a rural area." According to Scott (1999: 461) the criteria for defining village may vary from state to state, country to country. In his effort he defines village as a small community, larger than a hamlet, but usually rural rather than urban. The Census of India uses the criteria of revenue village which has a definite name and has a surveyed boundary (Census of India 2011) Based on the above characteristics; we define villages as the following:

rural regions marked by the administrative boundaries usually for the purpose of revenue collection and administration consisting of comparatively permanent settlements of households outlined by primary self-governed units majorly based on agrarian mode of production with general expansion of

land ownership/cultivation of residents Village as the boundary marker including the basic characteristics of community life (extracted from the Census of India 2011).

2.3 VILLAGE: STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES

Ambedkar in his works enables us to analyse a village comprehensively with reference to the Hindu basis of village organisation and functioning. We will focus on the village structure and its processes in relation to Hinduism as the foundational aspect.

Caste System: The Foundation of Village Organisational Structure

What was Ambedkar's view of a village? Contrary to the glorified and pleasant picture of a village portrayed by the supporters of Hindu social order, Ambedkar saw villages as "cesspools that harboured caste oppression and social and economic backwardness" (Omvedt 2004). In Ambedkar's words:

The Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organisation to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world. It is claimed to be a special contribution to the theory of social organisation for which India may well be proud of. (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 19).

Ambedkar believed that the Indian villages were a form of ghetto. A ghetto which is well knitted based on the caste system and where the Hindu social order can flourish well. To corroborate this, Ambedkar further argues that Hinduism has Caste imbibed in it as its essential and integral part. Further, every Hindu has a caste. Ambedkar quotes Prof. Max Muller:

Modern Hinduism rests on the system of Caste as on a rock which no arguments can shake (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 3: 336).

Thus, from the above description we may argue that caste system has been the key organisational force behind the structural foundation of villages in India.

Ambedkar cites the travelogue of Alberuni, which describes the Hindu social organisation around 1030 AD. He writes:

The Hindus call their castes varna i.e. colours, and from a genealogical point of view they call them jataka i.e., births. These castes are from the very beginning only four. (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 3: 132-133)

These varnas, hierarchically arranged, starting from the top position were the following:

- Brahmins
- Kshatriyas
- Vaisyas
- Shudras.

Each individual of a particular group was named according to the occupations and modes of life. Moreover, within these social groups, there were several

restrictions and prescriptions ordained by religious texts. People of these groups were not allowed to eat together.

Moreover, within a group if there was enmity, they were separated from each other by keeping a board or a piece of cloth. In group dining everyone was forbidden to eat the remains of the meal (Ambedkar2014, Vol. 3: 133)

In addition to the four varnas, there was one more social category called Antyajas. Outside the caste category, they provided different kinds of services and were recognised as members practicing specific crafts and professions. This category consisted of the following eight guild members:

- the fuller,
- the shoemaker,
- the juggler,
- the basket and shield maker,
- the sailor,
- the fisherman,
- the hunter of wild animals and of birds,
- the weaver.

This social group lived near the village, inhabited by the above mentioned four castes, but outside it (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 3: 132-133).

Apart from them, there were people like Hadi, Doma (Domba), Candala, and Badhatau (sic) who were considered of no caste group (outcaste) and illegitimate. They were said to be born through fornication of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman. They were kept engaged in menial and dirty tasks. Some characteristics of this social group were:

- Hadi: They were considered very unclean.
- Doma: They used to play the lute and sing.
- The still lower castes practised killing as a trade and executed punishments after judicial decisions.
- Badhantan: They reportedly ate flesh of dead animals including dogs. (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 3: 133)

The villages were geographically sharply divided into two parts: for the touchables and for the untouchables. These parts had no associational relations or proximity between them. The residential areas of the untouchables were stigmatized with caste names like Maharwada, Mangwada, Chamrotti and Khaykana. Only for the purpose of revenue administration or postal communication, such residential areas of untouchables were included in the village belonging to the touchables.

Indian society in general and Indian villages in particular were different from the American or European society where individuals were free to choose their own occupation, residence, wife, political party and so on. The Indian villages were like real corporations from where the untouchables could not escape. This was because their relationship with the society in almost every sense was pre-

determined by the social structure of Indian villages to which the untouchables were made bound to conform (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 259-60). Thus, we may argue that despite the ascribed inferiority and humiliation, the reduction of entity into non-entity, the untouchables were usurped into the traditional oppressive system of village structures, turning the villages into “black holes” for untouchables.

Ambedkar marked a clear differentiation between the untouchables and the outcasts (2014, Vol. 3: 301). He cites Manu to define an outcaste: An outcaste was a person who was excluded by his caste through some kind of formal method. Manu ordered performing funeral rites when a person became an outcast. Hence an outcast was treated as if he were dead. However, there was a clause by which after performing the penance, the outcast was allowed to join the caste group again. Thus while untouchables belonged to the category that was out of the Hindu social order and were the receivers of extreme oppression, stigma and exclusion, the outcast category was formed due to the temporary exclusion of a person from his or her own caste category.

Untouchables: The In-group and Out-group Hatred Receivers

The status of untouchables in the villages was so pathetic that in some regions they were forced to wear a black thread to reduce the chances of a touchable getting polluted even by ignorance (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 141-42). In his third volume of writings and speeches Ambedkar mentions that Manu was of the opinion that the snataka should not stay and eat the food given by outcasts. Further, house owners were suggested to keep food on the ground for dogs, outcasts, chandals and the diseased (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 3: 301-302).

Examples of extreme revulsion against untouchables can also be found in the so called culturally developed places. For instance in Dwarka (in the Bombay Presidency), the untouchables were made to clap on the road and shout “Post, Post” for the convenience of the touchables (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 141-42). Similarly in south India the Cherumans of the Madras Presidency were made to stand thirty feet away from the superior caste people. They were not allowed to enter a Brahmin village or temple or tank. They had to make the sound “O, Oh, O” while walking on the roads to beware the people of their polluting presence. Similar customs were found in Cochin, Travancore and Palghat taluka.

The hatred and exclusion imposed upon the untouchables from the in-group (based on same religion) members effected the relations of untouchables with out-group members also. The Government of Bombay in 1928 appointed a Committee to inquire into the grievances of the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes. Its report succinctly highlights that despite different religious notions, mode of living and outlook in life, an orthodox Hindu will treat a Muslim, a Christian, a Parsi as touchable but not the members of the depressed classes. This practice further influenced negatively the people of other religions who despite the teachings of their religions, started practicing untouchability (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 138-39).

From the above discussion we may further infer that the inclusion of untouchables into the Hindu social order, including the village as a unit, has remained a false and fake claim. This can be further supported by the restrictions imposed upon their personal life apart from the geographical exclusion. In the words of Ambedkar (2014, Vol. 5: 133-34) untouchables were not authorized to raise themselves

above the ascribed status and dignity. They (including untouchable women) were not allowed to wear clean clothes or ornaments after the fashion of the higher class. They were not allowed to keep tiled roof or construct houses better than touchables. In day-to-day life they were strictly prescribed to stand and salute the touchables, banned to wear silver or gold or even brass or copper ornaments, carry the messages of the deaths to far flung residing relatives of touchables, perform menial and dirty works in the various ceremonies, to live upon the 'jhoothan' leftover food and dead animals (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 133-34).

In the fifth volume of his writings Ambedkar mentioned the incidence of 1935, of Kavitha village situated in Dholka taluka of Ahmedabad district, Bombay Presidency. An order was issued by the Bombay Government allowing untouchable children admission in public schools. In bitter opposition to this, the touchables of the village took out their wards from the village public school. The local residents, initially remained quiet for some time, but getting stimulus from another small incident, soon showed their real selves. They attacked the houses of the untouchables, specifically targeting those households that had applied for admission into the public school.

Therefore we may conclude that not only was the inclusion of untouchables into the village structure a false assertion, their exclusion was multidimensional. These exclusionary measures had limitless boundaries and affected the body, soul and conscience of the untouchables.

2.4 ANALYSING PURITY AND POLLUTION OF DIRECTIONS AND WIND

Not only social groups but also the geography and the atmosphere of villages were divided based on the notion of purity and pollution. Because the Hindus consider south as the most polluted direction, the untouchables were strictly ordered to locate their dwellings towards the south (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 5: 21). The untouchables were prohibited from standing on the side from where the wind was blowing towards a touchable.

If an untouchable abused his "superior", his punishment was disproportionate to the abuse. For example, Manu writes:

If out of arrogance he spits (on a superior) the King shall cause both his lips to be cut off, if he urinates (on him), the penis; if he breaks wind (against him) the anus. (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol. 5: 67).

Moreover, the rites related to outcasts were instructed to be carried out only outside the village boundary, so that the village area may not get polluted (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol. 3: 301). Thus, we can see how, even the division of natural resources of the Hindu villages was oppressive and unjust.

Most villages of India had religious structures of village deities. Ambedkar (2014, Vol. 3: 335) quotes Sir Edward Gait who describes Hinduism as a complex congeries of creeds and doctrines.

It shelters within its portals monotheists, polytheists and pantheists; Worshippers of the great God Siva and Vishnu, or of their female counterparts, as well as worshippers of the divine mothers, of the spirits of trees, rocks and streams and of the tutelary village deities.

2.5 THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE: NECESSITY OF COMMUNALISM IN VILLAGE PANCHAYATS

Ambedkar believed that the question of governing bodies of village was a very important one. The governing bodies play a vital role not only in local self-government but also in facilitating civic use. They also have a large say in issues related to life, liberty and property of the rural population (Ambedkar 2014, Vol.2: 104). Ambedkar was very much against village panchayats and considered them as “the bane of public life of India.” Quoting Mr. R.G. Pradhan, who was one of the members of the committee appointed in 1925 to report upon the working of the village Panchayat Act of 1920, Ambedkar writes that the village system has acted as an agent for fulfilling local particularism with local patriotism. For this reason, he argues – India has never become a united country (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol.2: 106).

While discussing the constitution of the panchayats, he maintained that for depressed classes the provision of adult suffrage was not sufficient, due to minority presence of depressed classes in most villages. Thus, provision of adult suffrage would never result in the conversion of minority into majority. Based on this, Ambedkar pleaded for special representation in the village panchayats for the depressed classes. Thus for the sake of self-representation of all the people, despite accusations, he admitted to the charge of communalism and said that he was “convinced that communalism must be my policy” (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol.2: 107).

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learned the village structure of Indian society. Ambedkar comprehensively understood the structure of Indian villages. Although he probed the structure and functions of the village as a system pertaining to Hindu society, as a trained sociologist, he logically questioned the historically celebrated structural-functional view of Indian villages and revealed the hierarchical, oppressive and exclusionary nature of the Indian village and the social relations within the village system.

Specifically Ambedkar questioned the role of religious texts and sanctions in the development of village organisational structure. He, time and again, proved the caste system as the very basis of Indian village organisation. He smartly revealed the privileged status of Brahmins within these settings and also highlighted the exclusion and illegitimation of various social groups, specifically the untouchables. Due to his training in economics, Ambedkar was able to locate the structural roots of unclean occupations and poverty in the Hindu social order. As a professional economist he exposed how natural resources were divided unequally and in an unjust manner among the people.

Not leaving any loose ends related to the study of village structures of India, Ambedkar affirmed that women were not a monolithic group and women belonging to the untouchable castes were far more oppressed and exploited than others.

He also analysed the political aspects of village as a unit and underlined the necessity of communalism in village panchayats in the form of special representation for the erstwhile excluded communities.

2.7 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Analyse Ambedkar view of village structure of Indian society?
- 2) Discuss the structural roots of poverty existing in Indian villages.
- 3) Underline the importance of communalism as stated by Ambedkar in the village panchayat system.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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