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# UNIT 25 AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE

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## Structure

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## 25.0 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit provides an introduction to the social structure of agrarian societies by focussing specifically on :

- what do we mean by agrarian social structure?
- notions and conceptions of agrarian societies,
- agrarian class structures and their transformations in India.

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## 25.1 INTRODUCTION

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What do we mean by agrarian social structure: In very simple words the agrarian societies are those settlements and groupings of people who earn their livelihood primarily by cultivating land and by carrying out related activities like animal husbandry. Agricultural production or cultivation is obviously an economic activity. However, like all other economic activities, agricultural production is carried out in a framework of social relationships. Those involved in cultivation of land also interact with each other in different social capacities. Some may self-cultivate the lands they own while others may employ wage labourers or give their land to tenants and sharecroppers. Not only do they interact with each other but they also have to regularly interact with various other categories of people who provide them different types of services required for cultivation of land. For example, in the old system of **jajmani** relations in the Indian countryside, those who owned and cultivated land had to depend for various services required at different stages of cultivation on the members of different caste groups.

### Box 25.01

**The cultivators were obliged to pay a share of the farm produce to different caste groups, in exchange of labour. Similarly, most of the cultivating farmers today sell a part of their farm yield in the market to earn cash income with which they buy modern farm yield in the market to earn cash income with which they buy modern farm inputs and goods for personal consumption. These relationships of farmers with the market are often mediated through middlemen.**

All these interactions are carried out in an institutional set-up. The most important aspects of this social or institutional framework of agriculture are the patterns of land ownership and the nature of relationships among those who own or possess land and those who cultivate the lands. Agricultural practices and the land ownership patterns in a given society evolve historically over a long period of time. Those who own land invariably command a considerable degree of power and prestige in the rural society. It is these sets of relationships among the owners of land and those who provide various forms of services to the land-owning groups that we call the agrarian class structure.

## 25.2 NOTIONS OF AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

Unlike the modern industrial societies where it is rather easy to identify various class groups (such as, the working class, the industrial and the middle classes), the social structures of agrarian societies are marked by diversities of various kinds. The nature of agrarian class structure varies a great deal from region to region. The situation is made even more complex by the facts that in recent times the agrarian structure in most societies have been experiencing fundamental transformations. In most developed societies of the West, agriculture has become a rather marginal sector of the economy, employing only a very small proportion of their populations, while in the Third world countries it continues to employ large proportions of their populations, though the significance of agriculture has considerably declined. Thus, to develop a meaningful understanding of the agrarian social structure, we need to keep in mind the fact that there is no single model of agrarian class structure that can be applied to all the societies.

### Activity 1

Visit a village close to your residence and try to ascertain various classes in it. How is it related to caste in that village? Write down your findings in a note and compare it with other students in your study centre.

### 25.2.1 The Classical Notion of Undifferentiated Peasant Society

Anthropologists developed the classical notion of peasant society during the post-war period (after 1945). This notion was largely derived from the Western experience. Peasant societies were seen to have emerged after disintegration of the tribal form of social and economic life and when human beings began to earn their living by cultivating land. They also started living in small settlements. Further, the typical peasant societies were seen to be pre-industrial in nature. As the economies developed with the onset of the industrial revolution, the traditional "peasant way of life" gradually began to change, giving way to the modern urban life styles.

Peasantry, in its anthropological perspective, was essentially an undifferentiated social formation. In terms of their social and economic organisation, peasants were all like each other. They cultivated their own plots of land with the labour of their families and produced primarily for their own consumption. In other words, there were no significant class differences within the peasantry. While internally the peasantry was more or less homogenous, peasant societies were invariably dominated from outside by the urban elite. Eric Wolf points out that unlike the "primitive communities" peasant societies produced surplus (more than their consumption/subsistence requirements), which was generally transferred to the dominant rulers in the city, mostly in the form of land tax or land revenue.

In cultural and social terms, peasants were seen to be fundamentally different from the modern entrepreneurs. Their attitude towards work and their relationship with the land was very different from that of the profit-seeking entrepreneurs of the modern Industrial societies. Robert Redfield, who pioneered anthropological research on peasantry, argued that "the peasantry was a universal human-type". Peasants were attached to land through bonds of sentiments and emotions. Agriculture, for them, was "a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit".

Following this "classical discussion", Theodor Shanin developed an "Ideal Type" of the peasant society. He defined peasants as "small agricultural producers, who, with the help of

simple equipment and the labour of their families, produced mostly for their own consumption, direct or indirect, and for the fulfillment of obligations to holders of political and economic power". He further identified four interdependent facets of peasant societies.

- i) Peasant family works as the basic multi-dimensional unit of social organisation. The family farm operates as the major unit of peasant property, production, consumption, welfare, social reproduction, identity, prestige, sociability and welfare. The individual tends to submit to a formalised family role-behaviour and patriarchal authority.
- ii) Land husbandry works as the main means of livelihood. Traditionally defined social organisation and a low level of technology. Traditionally defined social organisation and a low level of technology characterise peasant farming.
- iii) Peasant societies follow specific cultural patterns linked to the way of life of a small rural community. Peasant culture often conforms to the traditional norms of behaviour and is characterised by face to face relations.
- iv) the domination over peasantry by outsiders. The peasants are invariably kept at arm's length from the source of power. Shanin argues that their political subjugation interlinks with their cultural subordination and economic exploitation.

In this kind of a framework, though peasants are seen as dominated by outsiders, they are not very different from each other, particularly in terms of their class status. In other words, in this classical notion of the peasant society, there are no internal class differences within the peasantry. The core unit of social organisation is the peasant household.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Describe the notion of undifferentiated peasant societies. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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- 2) Discuss Shanin's "Ideal Type" of a peasant society. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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However, this conception of peasant society emerged from the specific experience of the European societies. The historical literature on different regions of the world tends to show that the agrarian societies were not as autonomous as they are made out to be in such formulations. Agrarian societies were also internally differentiated in different strata. In India, for example, the rural society was always divided between different caste groups and only some groups had the right to cultivate land while others were obliged to provide services to the cultivators. Similarly, parts of Europe had serfdom where the overlords dominated the peasantry. Such societies were also known as feudal societies.

### 25.2.2 Feudalism as a Type of Agrarian Society

Historically, the concept of feudalism has generally been used for social organisation that evolved in parts of Europe after the tribal groups settled down and became regular cultivators. With the success of industrial revolution during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, feudal societies disintegrated, giving way to the development of modern capitalist economies. However, over the years, the term feudalism has also come to acquire a generic meaning and is frequently used to describe the pre-modern agrarian societies in other parts of the world as well.

When compared with the concept “peasant society”, the term feudalism conveys a very different notion of agrarian class structure. Cultivators in feudal societies are seen as a subordinate class. The land they cultivate does not legally belong to them. They only have the right to cultivate the land whose legal owner is usually the “overlord” or “feudal lord”. The distinctive feature of the agrarian class structure in feudalism is the relationship of “dependency” and “patronage” that exists between the cultivators and the “overlords”. The cultivating peasants have to show a sense of “loyalty” and obligation towards their overlords. This sense of loyalty is expressed not only by paying a share of the produce of land to the landlord but very often the peasants are also obliged to work for the overlord and perform certain duties without expecting any wages in return. The system of **begar** was (unpaid labour) popular in many parts of India until some time back is an example of this kind of a system.

### 25.2.3 Contemporary Agrarian Societies: A Sub-Sector of Modern Capitalist System

The spread of industrialisation in the Western countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in rest of the world during 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought about significant changes in the agrarian sector of the economy as well. We can identify two important changes in the agrarian economy that came with industrialisation and development. First, agriculture lost its earlier significance and became only a marginal sector of the economy. For example, in most countries of the West today, it employs only a small proportion of the total working population (between two to five or six per cent) and its contribution to the total national income of these countries is also not very high. In the countries of the Third World also, the significance of agriculture has been declining over the years. In India, for example, though a large proportion of population is still employed in agricultural sector, its contribution to the total national income has come down substantially (from nearly sixty per cent at the time of independence to less than thirty per cent during early 1990s).

The second important change that has been experienced in the agrarian sector is in its internal social organisation. The social framework of agricultural production has experienced a sea change in different parts of the world during the last century or so. The earlier modes of social organisations, such as, “feudalism” and “peasant societies” (as discussed above) have disintegrated giving way more differentiated social structures. This has largely happened due to the influences of the processes of industrialisation and modernisation. The modern industry has provided a large variety of machines and equipment for carrying out farm operations, such as, ploughing and threshing. This mechanisation of agricultural production has made it possible for the landowners to cultivate much larger areas of land in lesser time. Certain other technological breakthroughs also gave the cultivators chemical fertilisers and the new high yielding varieties of seeds. The net result of these changes has been an enormous increase in the productivity of land. The introduction of new farm technologies has not only increased the

productivity of land but has also led to significant changes in the social relations in agrarian societies.

**Box 25.02**

**The mechanisation and modernisation of agriculture made it possible for the cultivating farmers to produce much more than their consumption requirements. The surplus came to the market. Also they began to produce crops that were not meant for direct consumption of the local community. These “cash crops” were produced exclusively for sale in the market. The cultivators also needed cash for buying new inputs. In other words, the mechanisation of agriculture led to an integration of agriculture in the broader market economy of the nation and the world.**

### **25.2.4 Agriculture and Market**

The mechanisation of agriculture and its integration in the broader market economy has also in turn transformed the social relations of production in the agrarian sector. While some scholars see it merely as a new mode of subordination of the peasant economy by the urban industrial economy, others have looked at it as a more fundamental change that transforms the agrarian society as well. Scholars call this process of change as the development of capitalist relations in agriculture. The development of capitalism in agriculture transforms the earliest relations of loyalty and patronage into those that are instrumental in nature. The relations among different categories of population involved in agricultural production tend to become formalised, without any sense of loyalty or obligation.

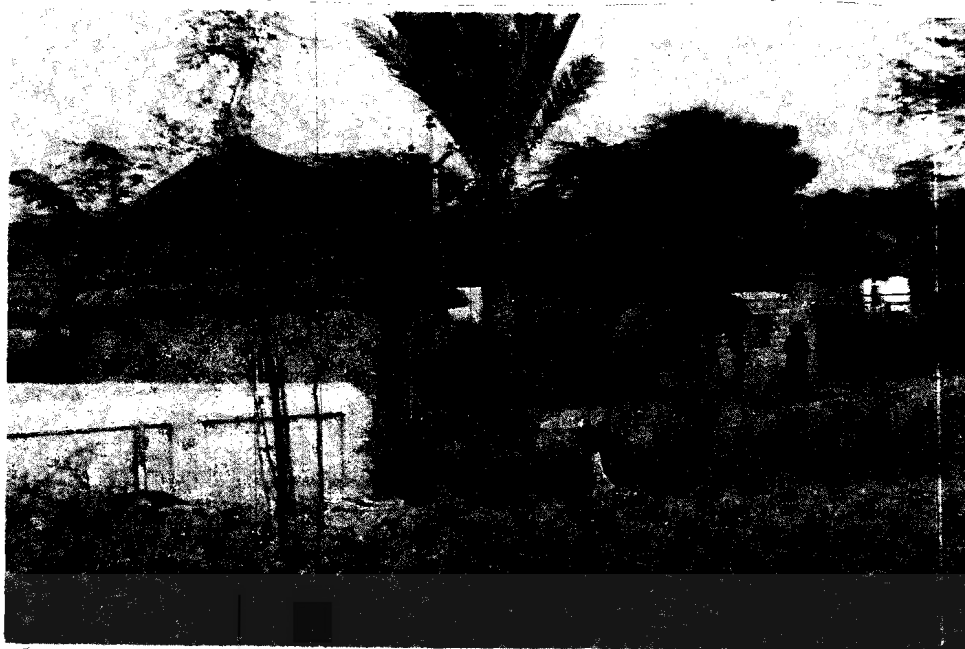
**Activity 2**

**Talk to some villagers about the effects of mechanization in agriculture in their village. Note down and compare your findings with other students in the study centre.**

This process is also expected to lead to a process of differentiation among the peasantry. The peasantry gets divided into different strata or classes. Not everyone benefits from the mechanisation process equally. Further, the market mechanisms put pressure on the cultivating such peasants in a manner that some survive while others tend to lose out and become landless labourers. Similarly, those who worked as tenants are generally evicted from the lands being cultivated by them and are employed as wage servants by the landowners. While some among the cultivating population become rich, others are left with small plots of land.

The attitude of the peasants towards their occupation also undergoes a change. In the pre-capitalist or the traditional societies, the peasantry produced mainly for their own consumption. The work on the fields was carried out with the labour of their family. Agriculture, for the peasantry, was both a source of livelihood as well as a way of life.

As agriculture is integrated in the capitalist market economy, the social framework of agriculture also undergoes a change and so does the attitude of cultivators towards their occupation. They begin to look at agriculture as an enterprise. They work on their farms with modern machines and produce cash crops that are sold in the market. Their primary concern becomes earning profits from cultivation. Thus, the peasants are transformed into enterprising “farmers”. The agrarian societies also lose their earlier equilibrium. Farmers, unlike the peasantry which is viewed as a homogenous class category, as a differentiated lot. They are divided in different categories or classes. The agrarian class structure undergoes a basic change with the development of capitalism in agriculture.



Agrarian life usually means a lower class existence, with small dwellings and few amenities

*Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi*

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### 25.3 THE CONCEPT OF CLASS AND ITS APPLICATION IN ANALYSES OF AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

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The concept of class was developed by sociologists and other social scientists to describe the prevailing structures of social relationships in the industrial societies of the West. Prominent among those who developed the concept were Karl Marx and Max Weber. Giddens defined classes as “large scale groupings of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the types of life style they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth, together with occupation, are regarded as the chief basis of class differences”.

As mentioned above the concept of class was first used to describe the social groupings in the industrial societies of the West. Over the years scholars have used the concept to understand social structures in other settings as well. During the early twentieth century, Lenin developed an elaborate theory to explain the process of class differentiation among the peasantry in Russia. Similarly, Mao Tse Tung, the leader of the Chinese revolution used the concept of class in his analysis of the Chinese revolution used the concept of class in his analysis of the Chinese peasantry. The writing of Lenin and Mao are regarded as pioneering works in understanding agrarian class structures and agrarian changes.

Lenin suggested that with the development of capitalism in agriculture, the peasantry, the hitherto was an undifferentiated social category, gets differentiated or divided into various social classes. Initially, the Russian peasantry was divided in five different classes that included the i) the landlords; ii) the rich peasants; iii) the middle peasants; iv) the poor peasants; and v) the landless labourers. Lenin also argues that gradually, the peasantry, in Russian as well as in other countries, would experience a process of polarisation. Eventually there would be only two classes, the capitalist farmers and the landless proletariats.

However, the actual empirical experience of capitalist development in agriculture in different parts of the world does not confirm to Lenin's prediction. Though agriculture has been gradually integrated in the market economy and peasantry has also got divided into various classes, there is very little evidence to support the argument that the agrarian

population is getting polarised into two classes. In Western countries as well as in the countries of the Third World, the middle and small size cultivators have not only managed to survive, in some countries their numbers have even gone up.

## 25.4 AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CHANGE IN INDIA

As mentioned above, agrarian class structure in a given society evolves over a long period of time. It is shaped historically by different socio-economic and political factors. These historical factors vary from region to region. Thus, though one can use the concept of class to make sense of agrarian structures in different contexts, the empirical realities vary from region to region.

The traditional Indian “rural communities” and the agrarian social structures were organised within the framework of “jajmani system”. This was a peculiarly Indian phenomenon. The different caste groups in the traditional Indian village were divided between jajmans (the patrons) and the kamins (the menials). The jajmans were those caste groups who owned and cultivated lands. The kamins provided different kinds of services to the jajmans. While the kamins were obliged to work for the jajmans, the latter were required to pay a share from the farm produce to their kamins. The relationship was based on a system of reciprocal exchange.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a note on contemporary agrarian society. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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- 2) Describe in brief Lenin’s view on the development of capitalism in agriculture. Use about ten lines for your description.

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However, those who participated in this system of reciprocal exchange did not do so on equal footings. Those who belonged to the upper castes and owned land were obviously more powerful than those who came from the menial caste groups. The structure of agrarian relations organised within the framework of jajmani system reinforced the inequalities of the caste system. The caste system in turn provided legitimacy to the unequal land relations.

Over the years the jajmani system has disintegrated and rural society has experienced profound changes in its social structure. The agrarian class structure has also changed. These changes have been produced by a large number of factors.

#### **25.4.1 Agrarian Changes During the British Colonial Rule**

The agrarian policies of the British colonial rulers are regarded as among the most important factors responsible for introducing changes in the agrarian structure of the sub-continent. In order to maximise their incomes from land (which was collected from the cultivators in the form of land revenue), they introduced some basic changes in the property relations in the Indian countryside. These agrarian policies of the colonial rulers had far reaching consequences. In Bengal and Bihar, in parts of Chennai and United Province they conferred full ownership rights over the erstwhile zamindars that were only tax collecting intermediaries during the earlier regimes. The vast majority of peasants who had been actually cultivating land became tenants of the new landlords. Similarly, they demanded revenues in the form of a fixed amount of cash rather than as a share from what was produced on the land. Thus, even when bad weather destroyed the crop; the peasants were forced to pay the land revenue.

These changes led to serious indebtedness among the peasantry. They were forced to mortgage their land in order to meet the revenue demands. In the long run it led to peasants losing their lands to moneylenders and big landowners. The big landowners and moneylenders emerged as a dominant class in the countryside while the ordinary peasants suffered. In the new agrarian class structure that emerged during the colonial rule, peasants had no motivation to improve their lands and work hard. As a result the agricultural production declined.

#### **25.4.2 Agrarian Changes After Independence**

The nationalist leadership during the struggle for freedom had mobilised peasantry on the promise that once the country was liberated from colonial rule, they would introduce changes in the land relations. This process was initiated immediately after Independence. The central government directed the state governments to pass "land reform legislations" that would abolish the intermediary landlords, the zamindars, and grant the ownership rights to the actual tillers of the land. Some legislations were to also grant security to the tenants. The states also fixed an upper ceiling on the holding size of land that a single household could possess. The surplus land was to be surrendered to the state and was to be redistributed among those who had no land.

However, though the legislations were passed by all the states, only in some cases they produced desired effects. It has been argued that only in those parts of the country where peasants were politically mobilised that the land reforms could be effectively implemented. While the zamindari system was abolished in most parts, the ceiling legislations had very little effect.

##### **Box 25.03**

The government of free India introduced developmental programmes to encourage the cultivators to increase productivity of their lands. These included the Community Development Programme (CDP), the Co-operatives and the Green Revolution Technology. These programmes were designed to introduce modern methods of cultivation in the Indian countryside. The cultivating farmers were provided with new technology, seeds and fertilisers at subsidised rates. The state agencies also provided them cheap credit. Though in principle these schemes were



meant for everybody, studies carried out in different parts of India tend to reveal that the benefits of the state support to agriculture were not equally shared by all the sections of rural society. Most of the benefits went to those who were already rich and powerful. However, despite this bias, these initiatives have been able to bring about a significant change in the agrarian economy at least in some parts of the country. This is particularly true about the regions like Punjab, Haryana, Western U.P., Coastal Andhra, and parts of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Apart from increasing productivity of land, these changes have transformed the social framework of the Indian agriculture. Agriculture in most parts of India is now carried out on commercial lines. The old structure of jajmani relations has more or less completely disintegrated, giving way to more formalised arrangements among the cultivators and those who work for them. Some scholars have argued that these changes indicate that capitalist form of production is developing in agriculture and a new class structure is emerging in the Indian countryside.

## 25.5 AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE IN INDIA

As mentioned above the traditional Indian society was organised around caste lines. The agrarian relations were governed by the norms of jajmani system. However, the jajmani relations began to disintegrate after the colonial rulers introduced changes in the Indian agriculture. The process of modernisation and development initiated by the Indian State during the post-independence period further weakened the traditional social structure. While caste continues to be an important social institution in the contemporary Indian society, its significance as a system of organising economic life has considerably declined. Though the agricultural land in most parts of India is still owned by the traditionally cultivating caste groups, their relations with the landless menials are no more regulated by the norms of caste system. The landless members of the lower caste now work with the cultivating farmers as agricultural labourers. We can say that in a sense, caste has given way to class in the Indian countryside.

However, the agrarian social structure is still marked by diversities. As pointed out by D.N. Dhanagare, "the relations among classes and social composition of groups that occupy specific class position in relation to land-control and land-use in India are so diverse and complex that it is difficult to incorporate them all in a general schema". However, despite the diversities that mark the agrarian relations in different parts of country, some scholars have attempted to club them together into some general categories. Amongst the earliest attempts to categorise the Indian agrarian population into a framework of social classes was that of a well-known economist, Daniel Thorner. He suggested that one could divide the agrarian population of India into different class categories by taking three criteria. First, type of income earned from land (such as, 'rent' or 'fruits of own cultivation' or 'wages'). Second, the nature of rights held in land (such as, 'proprietary' or 'tenancy' or 'share-cropping rights' or 'no rights at all'). Third, the extent of field-work actually performed (such as, 'absentees who do no work at all' or 'those who perform partial work' or 'total work done with the family labour' or 'work done for others to earn wages'). On the basis of these criteria he suggested the following model of agrarian class structure in India.

- i) **Maliks**, whose income is derived primarily from property rights in the soil and whose common interest is to keep the level of rents up while keeping the wage-level down. They collect rent from tenants, sub-tenants and sharecroppers.
- ii) **Kisans**, working peasants, who own small plots of land and work mostly with their own labour and that of their family members.
- iii) **Mazdoors**, who do not own land themselves and earn their livelihood by working as tenants/ sharecroppers or wage labourers with others.

Thorner's classification of agrarian population has not been very popular amongst the students of agrarian change in India. Development of capitalist relations in agrarian sector of the economy has also changed the older class structure. For example, in most regions of India, the Maliks have turned into enterprising farmers. Similarly, most of the tenants and

sharecroppers among the landless mazdoors have begun to work as wage labourers. Also, the capitalist development in agriculture has not led to the kind of differentiation among the peasant as some Marxist analysts predicted. On the contrary, the size of middle level cultivators has swelled.

The classification that has been more popular among the students of agrarian structure and change in India is the division of the agrarian population into four or five classes. At the top are the **big landlords** who still exist in some parts of the country. They own very large holdings, in some cases even more than one hundred acres. However, unlike the old landlords, they do not always give away their lands to tenants and sharecroppers. Some of them organise their farms like modern industry, employing a manager and wage labourers and producing for the market. Over the years their proportion in the total population of cultivators has come down significantly. Their presence is now felt more in the backward regions of the country.

After big landlords come the **big farmers**. The size of their land holdings varies from 15 acres to 50 acres or in some regions even more. They generally supervise their farms personally and work with wage labour. Agricultural operations in their farms are carried out with the help of farm machines and they use modern farm inputs, such as, chemical fertilisers and hybrid seeds. They invariably belong to the local dominant castes and command a considerable degree of influence over the local power structure, both at the village level as well as at the state level. While the big farmers is more visible in the agriculturally developed regions of the country.

The next category is that of the **middle farmers** who own relatively smaller holdings (between 5 acres to 10 or 15 acres). Socially, like the big farmers, they too mostly come from the local dominant caste groups. However, unlike the big farmers, they carry out most of the work on farms with their own labour and the labour of their families. They employ wage labour generally at the time of peak seasons, like harvesting and sowing of the crops. Over the years, this category of cultivators has also begun using modern inputs, such as, chemical fertilisers and hybrid seeds. Proportionately, they constitute the largest segment among the cultivators.

**The small and marginal farmers**, are the fourth class of cultivators in India. Their holding size is small (less than five acres and in some cases even less than one acre). They carry out almost all the farm operations with their own labour and rarely employ others to work on their farms. In order to add to their meager earnings from cultivation, some of them work as farm labourers with other cultivator. Over the years, they have also come to use modern farm inputs and begun to produce cash crops that are grown for sale in the market. They are among the most indebted category of population in the Indian countryside. As the families grow and holdings get further divided, their numbers have been increasing in most part of India.

The last category of the agrarian population is that of the landless labourers. A large majority of them belong to the ex-untouchable or the dalit caste groups. Most of them own no cultivable land of their own. Their proportion in the total agricultural population varies from state to state. While in the states like Punjab and Haryana they constitute 20 to 30 per cent of the rural workforce, in some states, like Andhra Pradesh, their number is as high as fifty per cent. They are among the poorest of the poor in rural India. They not only live in miserable conditions with poor housing and insecure sources of income, many of them also have to borrow money from big cultivators and in return they have to mortgage their labour power to them. Though the older type of bondage is no more a popular practice, the dependence of landless labourers on the big farmers often makes them surrender their freedom, not only of choosing employer, but invariably also of choosing their political representatives.

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## 25.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have examined, discussed and analysed notions of Agrarian Societies. We examined various types of these notions and went on to present the concept of class and

how it is applied in the study of agrarian societies. We then discussed agrarian social structure and change in India and agrarian structure in India. We were, therefore, able to develop and present a lucid picture of agrarian class structure.

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## 25.7 KEY WORDS

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<b>Agrarian</b>	: rural, dependent on agriculture.
<b>Kisan</b>	: peasants who have small plots of land on which their is family labour.
<b>Malik</b>	: Those who have property rights and work land by wage workers.
<b>Mazdoor</b>	: Landless sharecroppers or tenants.
<b>Peasant Society</b>	: undifferentiated society, preindustrial in nature.

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## 25.8 FURTHER READINGS

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Dhanagare, D.N. (1983), *Peasant Movements in India, 1920-50*, Delhi, OUP.

Gupta, D. ed. (1992), *Social Stratification*, Delhi, OUP.

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## 25.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The peasant society concept was derived largely from the western society. Peasants were believed to have emerged out of the disintegration of tribals who cultivated land. They lived in small settlements. Peasant societies are pre-industrial. Peasantry in this perspective was basically an undifferentiated social formation. This is because in their social and economic organisation peasants were similar to one another. They were basically self sufficient on the land they worked on. Thus, there were no significant class differences within the peasantry. However, while internally the peasants were homogenous from the outside they were dominated by the urban elite. Peasant societies even produced surplus which was given up to urban rulers as tax.
- 2) For Shanin the Ideal Type of peasant society as producers who produced mostly for their own consumption, and for the fulfillment of obligations to the rulers - that is the holders of political and economic power. He identified four inter-dependent facets of peasant life which were:
  - i) peasants work on their own land with the help of their family
  - ii) land is worked with low level technology
  - iii) peasants have specific cultural patterns
  - iv) peasants are dominated by outsiders.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The spread of industrialisation in the west made the work force in agriculture relatively low. Secondly, it altered agrarian structure. The mechanisation and the modernisation of agriculture made possible a huge surplus. Through the production of cash crops cultivators could reinvest their earnings and developed close links with the market. Thus, the development of capitalism in agrarian society changed the earlier relations of loyalty and patronage into those that are instrumental. It also lead to

differentiation among peasantry. Further, the pressure of mechanisation in agriculture benefited some peasants while others became landless labourers. Agriculture became an enterprise and profit from cultivation became the main motive in agriculture.

- 2) For Lenin development of capitalism definitely affected the peasantry dividing previously undifferentiated category into various groups. The Russian peasantry became divided into i) landlords, ii) rich peasants, iii) middle peasants, iv) poor peasants and v) landless labourers. Lenin felt the peasants would experience polarisation and eventually there would be only two classes, the capitalist farmers and the landless proletariat.



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## UNIT 26 INDUSTRIAL CLASSES

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### Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 Origin of Class Systems
  - 26.2.1 Characteristics of Class Structure
- 26.3 Class and Industrial Society
  - 26.3.1 Industrial Classes
  - 26.3.2 Features of Capitalist Society
  - 26.3.3 Features of Socialist Societies
  - 26.3.4 Classes in Capitalist Societies
- 26.4 Karl Marx : Class, Inequality and Capitalism
  - 26.4.1 Mode of Production
  - 26.4.2 Class Struggle
  - 26.4.3 Class Consciousness
  - 26.4.4 Capitalist Industrial Society
- 26.5 Max Weber : Industrial Classes
- 26.6 Giddens, Parkin and Bergel
- 26.7 Class Structure in Socialist Societies
- 26.8 Capitalist and Socialist Societies: A Comparison
- 26.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 26.10 Key Words
- 26.11 Further Readings
- 26.12 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 26.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit you should be able to:

- provide the origin of class systems;
- give the nexus of class and industrial society;
- indicate features of capitalism and socialism; and
- outline Marx's and Weber's views on industrial classes.

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### 26.1 INTRODUCTION

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Social class as a term became important in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. People often used the notion of estate to define class. Since the American and French revolution, class a stark embodiment of the principle of inequality has been object of scientific study. Saint Simon was the first to use the term 'Class' as an alternative to 'Estate'. Thus, the idea of Class is pre-Marxian. Social class refers to achieved position and its regular rewards associated with it, i.e., it tends to promote Individual merit, Skill and Ability. Social classes are de-facto groups. Groups not legally or religiously defined and sanctioned groups. There are characteristic groups of Industrial societies. Social classes refer to achieved social position. It tends to promote the value of Individual merit and its regular rewards.

Among Scholars, there is a considerable difference in recognising the membership precisely. However, most Sociologists would agree in recognising the existence of :

- i) Upper Class (Owners)

- ii) Middle Class – or White-collar workers
- iii) Working class

In some societies, the existence of the fourth class, the Peasantry, is also recognised.

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## 26.2 ORIGIN OF CLASS SYSTEMS

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Almost all class systems are based on assumptions that “All men are born free and equal”. We find a sharp contrast between what a class system actually is and what it pretends to be. Thus, few argue that class system has no ideological base - Thus, they are residual category. Classes originated in society due to number of reasons. Some of the important ones being :

- i) Expansion of productive forces beyond the level needed for subsistence.
- ii) The extension of division of labour outside the family
- iii) The accumulation of surplus wealth
- iv) The emergence of private ownership of resources.

### 26.2.1 Characteristics of Class Structure

There are specific characteristics of caste. They are :

- i) Vertical order of social classes - there is a hierarchy in terms of privileges and discrimination.
- ii) There is also a permanent idea of class interest.
- iii) Idea of class-consciousness, awareness of class, hierarchy, identity and solidarity is present.

Existence of class implies that there is an idea of social distance. Class distinctions get expressed in the form of inequalities and class boundaries.

There are two ways of conceiving class structure.

- i) Schemes of gradation
- ii) Schemes based on Relations of dependence
  - a) One-sided dependence
  - b) Mutual dependence

As a system of social relations class is understood usually as a subjection of one over the other. Some sociologists view the idea of class as conquest where victors are the upper class and the defeated classes are lower.

With regard to the idea of development of class, the question usually asked is - Are social classes distinctive of modern contemporary societies, i.e., industrial societies only or does one find them in all known societies? For this Marxist would argue that they exist in all historically recorded societies but other Sociologists argue that social classes exist only in contemporary societies where economic activities pre-dominate and where industrialisation progressively transforms the totality of existence.

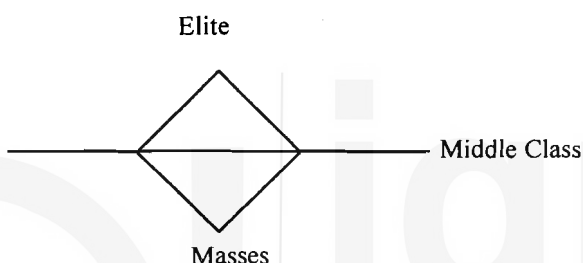
People who belong to the same social class have more or less the same “life chances”, i.e., the probability of securing the good things of life. Such a freedom, high standard of living, Leisure or whatever things are highly valued in a given society. Association of different classes is between people of unequal society social class affects the “life-style”. Thus, one can conclude by saying that class is implied as an opposition to hereditary privileges, and to an immutable hierarchy of ranks.

## 26.3 CLASS AND INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

There are three features of stratification in industrial societies :

- i) Differentiation
  - ii) Consistency
  - iii) Social mobility
- i) **Differentiation** : In industrial societies, there is a tendency towards homogeneity, i.e., increase similar in population in terms of standard of living, wealth and power. More and more people are becoming middle-class, i.e., a population with similar standard of income, style of life, status.

The system of class differentiation is becoming or taking a shape of a diamond in recent years.



This expansion of the Middle Class is mainly due to :

### a) Expansion of Division of Labour

A set-up where specialised skills are required for every individual in the occupation becomes important. Each occupation is accorded, i.e., it is according to ones achievement, skill, talent, etc.

### b) Increased Role of the State

The state has to maintain bureaucracy. For this, technically qualified people are required. For welfare activities, it requires personnel/population which is often fulfilled by middle-income.

- ii) **Consistency** : There is a tendency for the relative position of an individual or group in one stratification order to be same or in similar position in other orders.

Status Oriented  
(Traditional societies  
without any consistency

Vs Achievement Oriented  
(Consistency - Your position is  
dependent on your talent, skill)

- iii) **Social Mobility** : Closely associated with the idea of industrialisation is class mobility. Once societies reach a certain level of industrialisation their overall rates of mobility will increase, i.e., they will become more and more open - will become achievement oriented, will encourage merit, ability and talent.

### 26.3.1 Industrial Classes

The logical of industrialism leads to similar pattern of classes. The industrial societies are societies where large scale production is carried out, there is a separation of economic enterprise and family. The high degree of technological division of labour along with rational calculation of profit is seen as a central feature. The industrial societies that will be discussed are Capitalist (USA and UK) and late Socialist societies (USSR). These societies present a number of similar features in their Occupational structure, i.e., they employ people in the industry and in their general shape of social stratification. But they differ

widely in terms of their Political structure or regimes, their social doctrines and policies as well as their historical changes.

### 26.3.2 Features of Capitalist Society

- i) The means of production are privately owned. The notion of private ownership predominates.
- ii) The regulation of the Economy is decentralised, i.e., the balance between Production and Consumption is not decided according to Planning, but is governed by regularities in the Market. It is according to the guess-work in the market; influenced by the Demand and Supply factor.
- iii) A separation between employers and employees are seen. So that labourers possess labour power for which they are paid. And the owner owns means of production and is in a position to pay the labourer.
- iv) The profit motive pre-dominates. The main aim is to maximise profit.
- v) Since the distribution of resources is not determined by planning, supply and demand causes price to fluctuate in each part of the market and even in the economy as a whole.

Often the critics of capitalist society argue that Capitalism involves exploitation of the worker because it is based on the desire for profit. This exploitation is seen in terms of surplus value which results in extreme inequality of incomes. Since the capitalist societies are not planned economies, it always faces a danger of crisis of breaking down. Also, the surplus income is used for buying luxuries. This often involves a high degree of inequality in the distribution of income.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a note on the features of the Capitalist Societies in about ten lines.  
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- 2) In a (a) \_\_\_\_\_ (b) \_\_\_\_\_ the means of production are (c) \_\_\_\_\_ by the State.

### 26.3.3 Features of Socialist Societies

In the Socialist Societies it was found that :

- i) The means of Production were owned by the State.
- ii) The regulation of the Economy was done by the Central Planning Authority. The Distribution and Consumption is controlled by Planning authority.



- iii) In the Soviet Economy, the surplus values created by the worker, over and above, went to the whole society, as the main aim is welfare.

### 26.3.4 Classes in Capitalist Societies

Most scholars use economic factors as the basic criteria for differentiating classes. Adam Smith was the first person who spoke of society being divided into groups based on economic criteria and he calls them orders and according to him, there are three kinds of orders.

- i) Those who live by rent (Rentiers)
- ii) Those who live by wage (Wage earners)
- iii) Those who live by profit (The capitalist)

According to Aristotle, there are three classes in Society. The Upper class, Middle class and Poor class. According to him, out of these three classes, the Middle class is least ambitious and good for the development of any society. The upper class wants to earn profit and maintain its position. The poor class is too poor, their ambition being to improve their position. Thus, between the two ambitious classes, the Middle class is the best.

According to Bergel, Classes represent different sub-cultures which are related to each other and are derived from different roots. According to him, existence of class implies that there is idea of Social distance.

#### Activity 1

Visit a large factory in a town or city. What do you observe about division of labour and classes? Write down your observations and discuss them with other students in your study centre.

## 26.4 KARL MARX : CLASS, INEQUALITY AND CAPITALISM

Class, as a form of inequality, gained prominence with the work of Karl Marx. Marxian concept of class is explained with reference to capitalist society. He defined class as “any aggregate of persons who perform the same function in the organisation of production in any society”. Thus, “Freeman and Slaves (Slavery), Lords and serfs (Feudalism) in a word oppressor and oppressed are the names of social classes in different historical periods. According to Marx, Class is defined as “a Social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of Production”. A class is any aggregate of persons who perform the same function in organisation of production. It is determined not by occupation or income, but by the function performed in the process of production. For example, two carpenters, one of whom is the shop owner and the other his paid worker, belong to two different classes even though their occupation is the same.

According to Marx – Organisation of production is not sufficient condition for the development of social classes, there must be :

- i) Physical Concentration of masses of people
- ii) Easy communication
- iii) Growth of class consciousness.

For example, small peasant forms a vast mass and live in similar conditions but they are isolated from one another and are not conscious of their common interest, they do not constitute a class in Marxian sense.

What characterises a class is its economic status in the organisation of production in any society. According to Marx, except for primitive communism where there was no concept

of private property, no classes were present.

Marx believed that Western society had developed through four main epochs.

Primitive communism	—	No classes
Ancient Society	—	Masters and Slaves
Feudal Society	—	Lords and Serfs
Capitalist Society	—	Bourgeoisie and Proletariate

These classes are distinguished from each other by the difference of their position in the economy.

### 26.4.1 Mode of Production

The mode of production of each epoch determines the social, political and religious feature of society at that particular state in history, as well as the nature of class relations. Classes in society arise from a particular mode of production. For example, in capitalist mode of production, high level technology and capital comprise the means of production. This creates a system where in one section own the means of Production and others do not. This gets bifurcated into two classes, namely the Capitalist and the workers.

#### Box 26.01

Classes polarise because they stand in relation of antagonism to each other and class identities are strengthened because of common interests and common economic status in the system of production. Within this system are present inherent contradictions which lead to class-class struggle, a new society evolves, with new mode of production and subsequently, a new class reflecting it.

### 26.4.2 Class Struggle

Class struggle is a recurring feature according to Marx in all societies. This struggle, he says is inevitable because the ruling class in every society sows the seeds of its own destruction, sooner or later. Oppression – economic, political and ideological is a feature of this class-struggle. Exploitation leads to rise of opposed class. Thus, they feel alienated from a system which they help in treating, without labour, for instance, capitalism can never subsist. Yet, the workers are alienated. A consciousness develops around which working class is formed and when they clash, with the oppressions they overthrow the system leading to a new stage of social formation and the abolition of private means of ownership, as a consequence of which class-lessness emerges.

From the above, it becomes clear that only when class consciousness evolve and the class organises itself towards the pursuit of its own does a “class exists in the Marxian sense”. So, from a class in itself, it becomes a class for itself.

Thus, for Marx, the essential feature of social inequality is Power – the economic power. Society is divided into those who have it and those who do not, i.e., the oppressors and the oppressed. Marx’s economic interpretation is an explanation of what accounts for this inequality in power. Those who own the means of production have the power to rule and oppress those who do not own it. Class controls the prevailing ideas in a given society.

### 26.4.3 Class Consciousness

Marx specified a number of variables for the formation of class-class consciousness:

- i) Conflicts over the distribution of economic rewards between the classes.
- ii) Easy communication between the individual in the same class position so that ideal and programmes are readily disseminated.

- iii) Growth of class – Consciousness in the sense that the members of the class have a feeling of solidarity and understanding of their historical role.
- iv) Profound dissatisfaction of the Lower Class over its inability to control the economic structure of which it feels itself to be the exploited victim.
- v) Established of a political organisation resulting from the economic structure, the historical situation and maturation of class-consciousness.

The ideas of the ruling class in every epoch determine the ruling ideas, i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period pre-supposes the existence of a revolutionary class. Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself. Thus, he sees classes, as distinct sub-divisions whose interests often diverge. From the Marxian perspective, we can conclude that the relationship between the major social classes is one of mutual dependence and conflict.

#### 26.4.4 Capitalist Industrial Society

Thus, Marx in capitalist industrial society, identifies two main classes. The capitalist who pays the wage (Bourgeoisie) and the workers, who receives the wages (Proletariat). Marx predicted that as capitalism develops these two classes become more and more homogeneous, but as compared to him Dahrendorf argues that classes will become more and more heterogeneous, i.e., dissimilar and the working class get divided into three distinct levels – Unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled manual, workers with divergence interests.



**Industrial Society is Capital intensive and technology based**

*Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi*

Unlike Marx, who talked about two classes, Weber talks about the middle class also. According to him, as capitalism develops the middle class expands. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marxist predicted that a stage will come in capitalist development when the middle class would sink into the Proletariat (Pauperisation). But during 1950's and 1960's, a number of Sociologists suggested that just the opposite was happening.

They said a process of embourgeoisement was occurring whereby increasing number of manual workers were entering the middle class. According to them, the classes in Industrial society was acquiring the Pentagon shape where the mass of population was middle class

rather than working class. According to Clark Kerr, this was the requirement of the advanced industrialism which requires a highly educated, trained and skilled workforce.

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## 26.5 MAX WEBER : INDUSTRIAL CLASSES

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Weber argues that classes develop in Market economies, in which individuals compete for economic gains. He defines – “class as a group of individuals who share a similar economic position which influence both the material standard of their existence and what sort of personal life they are able to enjoy-by virtue, their standard and style of living is determined. Thus, according to Weber, “a person’s class situation is basically his Market situation” whereas for Marx, the class relationship is one of interdependence and conflict.

Like Marx, Weber sees class in economic terms. But he sees important differences in their Market situation. Say, different occupations have different market values. For example, Engineers and electricians have different market value. Thus, for Weber, a person’s class situation is basically his Market situation.

Those who share a similar class situation also share similar life chances. Their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable in their society. For example, access to higher education and good quality housing.

Like Marx, he also agrees that property owners and propertyless, are two classes. But he sees important differences in the market situation of the propertyless groups in society, i.e., there are more classes within non-property owner classes with differences in skills, occupational capacity, talents. These classes are:

- i) The propertied Upper class
- ii) The propertyless white-collar workers
- iii) The petty Bourgeoisie
- iv) The manual working class

These were placed according to their value of skill in the market. Those whose skills were scarce on the market commanded high salaries and constituted a separate class. Weber rejects the polarisation of two classes and talks of Middle class of white-collar or skilled workers. Middle class expands as capitalism develops. He argues that modern nation state requires a “rational bureaucratic set-up” which requires clerks and managers.

### Box 26.02

**Unlike Marx, Weber argues that those who belong to the same class need not necessarily produce a communal action or develop a class consciousness. They might behave in a similar way and have same attitude like similar voting behaviour or drinking habits. Weber rejects the inevitability of class revolution. They need not necessarily be a revolution. Class-consciousness may be there but it would be of different nature. For example, Caste groups in India.**

Those who belong to lower class may try for reforms. For this purpose, they come together to demand but never have drastic revolution to change the system. Another example, in industrial strikes, there may be lock-outs but revolution to change the system may not be there.

According to Weber, for workers to change the entire system, is not possible. For, to attack any system an ideological formula is essential. An intellectual class is essential, i.e., elite group, uneducated people cannot bring about a revolution without an ideological set-up, therefore, to do so.

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## 26.6 GIDDENS, PARKIN AND BERGEL

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**Anthony Giddens** identifies three major classes in industrial society. Particularly, in a capitalist society based on economic criteria:

- i) Upper class — Ownership of means of Production
- ii) Middle class — Owners of technical qualification
- iii) Lower class — Owners of manual labour

According to Frank Parkin, who provides occupational classification of social class, in modern capitalist society, the power to acquire rewards is directly related to the demands of the market for occupational skills. It is difficult to assess the claims that Upper classes are superior in intelligence and achievement. But a close look shows that tests measures the performance rather than intelligence and performance depend not only ability but on specific training. In other words, it requires highly educated workers which in turn leads to higher pay – higher status occupation. Market which has high consumption requirement required and helps in the growth of middle market.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Write a note on mode of production and its relation to class struggle. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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- 2) Say True or False.

According to Marx a person’s class situation is basically his market situation.

True       False

According to Bergel, classes are seen as natural, economic, political and cultural groups. He presents four views on class.

- i) Classes emerged in society as a result of breakdown of estate system in Europe, i.e., after the legal system was abolished a free society with achieved criteria developed.
- ii) Classes have no ideology – they are residual category.
- iii) He views the idea of class as conquest where the victors are the upper class and defeated classes are lower.
- iv) Stratification system represents biological differences as well, e.g., white superiority over black.

According to him, classes represent different sub-cultures which are related to each other and are derived from different roots. He argues that almost all class systems are based on assumption that “all men are born free and equal”. However, we find a sharp contrast between what a class system actually is and what it pretends to be.

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**26.7 CLASS STRUCTURE IN SOCIALIST SOCIETIES**

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Here the system of stratification is not the result of market economy rather it is a creation of the political elite where in Capitalist society there is plurality of elite’s, e.g., C.R. Mills

concept of three categories of elites in American Society. However, in Soviet society there was only one elite that is political elite. These elites form an interest group. Stratification is a product of the state imposed by bureaucracy. This uniform elite divides the society into ruling intellectuals Vs peasants. Scholars who have studied classes in socialist societies say that instead of using the word "class" one must use the word "strata". The main stratas being:

- |      |                |    |                         |
|------|----------------|----|-------------------------|
| i)   | Intelligentsia | a) | Ruling elite            |
|      |                | b) | Superior Intelligentsia |
|      |                | c) | General Intelligentsia  |
| ii)  | Ruling Class   | a) | Aristocracy             |
|      |                | b) | Rank and File           |
|      |                | c) | Disadvantaged worker    |
| iii) | Peasants       | a) | Well to do              |
|      |                | b) | Average Peasant         |

Marx predicted that public ownership of the forces of production is the first step towards the creation of an egalitarian society. All members would share the same relationship that of ownership to the forces of production. He believed that with state going away, the consumption of goods and services would be based each according to his needs. However, those who studied Soviet societies have talked about its class structure — Frank Parkin identifies different classes which can be distinguished in terms of differential economic rewards, occupational prestige and power.

- i) managerial, and administrative positions
- ii) skilled manual position
- iii) lower or unqualified white collar position
- iv) unskilled manual positions.

Although income equalities were not as great in Soviet societies as in capitalist societies, these were still significant.

According to Milovin Dijilas, a socialist society is not classless. The Bourgeoisie of the West have been replaced by a new ruling class in the East. This new class is made up of political bureaucrats, many of whom are high ranking officials of the communist party. They use power to further their own interest. Although in legal terms, the forces of production are communal owned, in practice, they are controlled by the new class for its own benefit. Political bureaucrats direct and control the economy and monopolise decisions regarding production, consumption, and production. As a result of this wide income differences between this class and masses is observed, associated with this is high privilege and status. According to Dijilas, the ruling class of the late Soviet Union is more exploitative than the bourgeoisie, its power is even greater because it is unchecked by political parties. He claims that in a single party state political bureaucrats monopolise power. He agrees with Marx, in practice their source of power is there because it controls the forces of production. Others reverse this and say that in Soviet societies economic power derives from political power. According to T.B. Bottomore, the new class controls the means of production because of its political power.

According to Polish scholar, Wesolowskis, although social stratification exists, the disappearance of classes in Marxian sense has removed the basic source of conflict. Again, in the society no small minority exploits the masses of population. Further, there are no serious conflicts of interest between the various strata since the forces of production are communally owned and everybody is working for the benefit of all. Although economic inequalities remain, they are determined by the principle — "To each according to his work", the society claims that, the share of the individual in the Division of the social product is determined by quality, quantity of his work, wages are function of quality of

work, this is, they are function of the level of skill and education necessary for carrying a given job.

### Activity 2

**In which way does a socialist society differ from a capitalist one. Talk to various people and describe what the Indian society is. Compare your notes with other students in the study centre.**

The important difference between the “The New Class” and the bourgeoisie of the West is that in the West property can be passed from father to son, whereas in the East members/ sons have no legal claim to property. Their privilege rests largely on political office which cannot be passed directly to offspring.

Wesolowski argues that classes in the orthodox sense have ceased to exist in socialist society and have been replaced by what are better described as strata.

Whether it is a Capitalist or Socialist society, in both, the idea of Profit dominates, i.e., Profit must be made within the enterprise as a guarantee of its proper functioning. However, in planned economies, vast resources are devoted to a branch of industry which is not making profit.

## 26.8 CAPITALIST AND SOCIALIST SOCIETIES : A COMPARISON

Often the Planned economies, i.e. Socialist societies are criticised by arguing that total planning entails depotism or tyranny or at the very least the absolute power of the planners. There is concentration of authority. This would often create tension between the representatives of workers, peasants and diverse industrial sectors to determine their fair share of national resources. The critics argue that in such economies, consumer’s choice is completely eliminated.

Thus we can present the differences between classes of capitalist societies and Soviet societies as under :

Capitalist	Late Socialist
In the Capitalist society, there is distinction between Property owners and Propertyless workers.	In Soviet society, the economic inequalities did not arise from difference in wealth; but inequality is based on income difference.
Difference between income from Property and income from work.	
Capital owners are also political leaders.	Separation between economic sphere and political sphere.
	Social distance between whole social groups are less obvious and less emphasised in. It is individual that reaches a Political elite/ standard.
Stratification is a product of economic system itself like one seen in American group between Whites + Blacks.	Conflict is generally suppressed by any kind of opposition (i.e., by intellectual leaders of society); but according to Dahendorf, Conflict is there between interest groups which is seen within imperatively coordinated elite.
In Capitalist society, there is a possibility of formation and establishment of organization, which opposes the elite in power.	Soviet societies claimed that there was no exploited class, no antagonism of the kind, that Marx speaks, of no political revolt of the kind, though there have been peasant

Distribution of resources is done through Capitalists themselves.

Wages and income are determined by capitalist.

Co-relation between income and wages is greater and more rigid and closely related.

Status is determined by amount of capital you possess i.e. whether you are an owner or a non-owner.

Organisation — Market is a control place and individuals in Market determine the nature of economy. Economy is less planned and instruments of production are owned by individuals.

Profit motive dominates.

Inequality is not deliberate but is the direct consequence of the system itself. The nature of production, consumption and distribution can be controlled.

Economic activities determine the inequality.

revolts. e.g., 1930's revolt of peasant in USSR against governments' notion of collectivization. One can observe sources of conflicts other than class in soviet societies.

Unequal distribution of goods done through government agencies.

Wage/ income are determined by the government.

Co-relation between unequal distribution of income is less than in capitalist society.

Close relation between education and occupational status (Occupation status).

Organisation — "Central planning authority" is important for distribution of resources. Totalitarian planned manner. Instruments of production are communally owned.

Non-monetary motive i.e. welfare motive dominates.

Inequality in soviet structure is deliberately created to suit the needs of the political regime.

Consumer needs are important; this influences the allocation of resources.

Stratification is not economical but politically oriented.

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## 26.9 LET US SUM UP

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In both the industrial societies, recent years have seen/witnessed an attack upon their economies inequality. Societies are aiming at giving full employment to its members, trying to raise the level of income of the working class and provide an economic security to all which was until recently thought by the upper class as always their monopoly. Recent years have almost entirely eliminated the class of domestic servants. This is one of the greatest gains which the working class has made in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. That is, they have escaped from subjection of upper class. The aim being mainly to eliminate the division of society into subjected and oppressed class.

In 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the relationship between various classes is, however, very different from that which was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the concept of social services, as a whole, gave a much greater effect in diminishing class differences than that would appear from their economic consequences alone.

Social mobility has generally increased with economic development of the industrial societies but the increase has been largely due to changes in the occupational structure. That is, it is due to the expansion of white collar and professional occupational and continuation of manual occupations.

There is a persistent effort to re-distribute wealth, income through progressive taxation, estate duties and taxes on capital gains. Therefore, there is equality of living standard, a growth of middle class.



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## 26.10 KEY WORDS

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- Capitalist** : Means of production in such a society are privately owned.
- Industrial** : Where the accent is upon heavy machinery, factories and so on.
- Socialist** : In such societies most of the industries and planning happen to be in the control of the state.

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## 26.11 FURTHER READINGS

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Bottomore, T. (ed.) 1973, *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford

Weber, M. 1964, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, (Trans. and ed. by Henderson A.M., and Parsons, T.), Free Press, Glencoe.

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## 26.12 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) In a capitalist society the means of production are privately owned. Further the questions of production and consumption are governed by market forces. Again there is a distinction between employers and employees, the latter being paid for their work by the former. The entire system is geared to the profit motive and the attempt is to maximize the profits. Finally prices depend upon market forces of supply and demand. It may be pointed out that the antics of capitalism also talk of exploitation and alienation of workers and predict a break down in the system.
- 2)
  - a) Socialist
  - b) economy
  - c) owned.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The mode of production is a concept central to Marx's thought. In each type of society there is a particular mode of production. In capitalist society we have the capitalist mode of production and there is a use of heavy capital based industries. The bourgeoisie who own the means of production exploit the workers and a class struggle ensures upto the point of revolution when the workers overthrow the capitalists leading to the formation of new stage of classless society where ownership of the means of production is collective. A classless society emerges.
- 2) False.

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## UNIT 27 MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA

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### Structure

- 27.0 Objectives
- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 The Concept of Class and Middle Class
- 27.3 Middle Classes in the Western Countries
- 27.4 Middle Classes in India
- 27.5 Rise of Middle Classes in India during the British Rule
- 27.6 Politics of Middle Classes during the Freedom Movement
  - 27.6.1 Middle Classes in India after Independence
  - 27.6.2 Size and Composition
- 27.7 Growth of Middle Classes after Independence
- 27.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 27.9 Key Words
- 27.10 Further Readings
- 27.11 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 27.0 OBJECTIVES

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After having read and studied this unit you will be able to:

- provide the concept of middle class;
- compare middle classes in India and western countries;
- describe the rise of middle classes in India;
- discuss politics of the middle class; and
- growth of middle classes after independence.

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### 27.1 INTRODUCTION

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The process of development or modernization being experienced in our country is not confined to the economy alone. It is leading to some fundamental changes in the social structure of the Indian society. As the process of change unfolds itself, new social groups and categories of people emerge on the scene. The institutionalization of the democratic system of governance based on adult franchise and the introduction of a secular constitution has transformed the traditional structures of power relations at different levels of social organization.

The last five decades of economic development and democratic governance have also transformed the structures of social stratification in India. The earlier system of domination and subordination based largely on the principles of caste hierarchy and ownership of agricultural land has given way to a different kind of power structure. Though the caste and the ownership of agricultural land continue to be significant, particularly in the rural areas, they are no more the exclusive determinants of social stratification in India today. A new set of power elite has emerged in India during the last fifty years or so. Similarly, we can observe the emergence of new social categories and occupational groupings of people.

## Box 27.01

The social structure of Indian society has for long been viewed in the framework of caste system. However, the development of a new urban economy and the changes experienced in agrarian relations in the recent past have, in a sense, made the institution of caste less significant, if not redundant. Thus, in order to understand the nature of emerging power structure and the new system of social stratification we need a different set of conceptual categories. Some sociologists working on the subject have suggested that we should move from the “caste” framework to that of “class”. Some others have however argued that though the old system of hierarchy has changed, caste still continues to play a determining role in matters of status differences in the Indian society. However, for a balanced understanding of the contemporary Indian society, we need to use both the concepts — class as well as caste. It is in this context of the changing structures of social stratification that the emergence of middle classes in India should be understood.

## 27.2 THE CONCEPTS OF CLASS AND MIDDLE CLASS

The concept of class has been one of the most important categories in the Western sociology. There has been a long tradition of looking at the Western society through the conceptual framework of class. The classical sociological thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber, have written a great deal on the concept of class. Class was the most important category for Marx in his analysis of the Western society and in his theory of social change.

Marx's model of class is a dichotomous one. It is through the concept of class that he explains the exploitation of subordinate categories by the dominants. According to Marx, in every class society, there are two fundamental classes. Property relations constitute the axis of this dichotomous system — a minority of 'non-producers', who control the means of production, are able to use this position of control to extract from the majority of 'producers' the surplus product which is the source of their livelihood. 'Classes', in the Marxian framework, are thus defined in terms of the relationships of groupings of individuals to the 'means of production'. Further, in Marx's model, economic domination is tied to political domination. Control of means of production yields political control.

In this dichotomous model of class structure, the position of the middle class is only transitional. The middle classes for Marx were the self-employed peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. They were so described because they continued to own the means of production they worked with, without employing wage labour. Marx predicted that these middle classes were destined to disappear as the capitalist system of production developed. Only the two major classes, proletariat or the working class and the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class were significant in the Marxian framework of class relations.

The other theorists of class have assigned much more significance to the 'middle classes'. Foremost of these have been sociologists like Max Weber, Dahrendorf and Lockwood.

Max Weber, though agrees with Marx that classes are essentially defined in economic terms, his overall treatment of the concept is quite different from that of Marx. Unlike Marx, he argues that classes develop only in the market economies in which individuals compete for economic gains. He defines classes as groups of people who share similar position in a market economy and by virtue of this fact receive similar economic rewards. Thus, class status of a person, in Weber's terminology, is his "market situation" or, in other words, his purchasing power. The class status of a person also determines his "life chances". Their economic position or "class situation" determines how many of the things considered desirable in their society they can buy.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain Marx's dichotomous model of class structure in about ten lines.
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- 2) Theorists that have assigned much significance to the middle classes include :
  - i).....
  - ii).....

Though, like Marx, Weber also uses the criteria of property ownership for defining classes, his theory provides a much greater scope for a discussion of the middle classes. He agrees with Marx that the two main classes in capitalist society are the property-owning classes and non-property owning classes. However, Weber does not treat all the non-property owning individuals as belonging to a single class of the proletariat. The "class situation" of the non-property owners differ in terms of their skills. Those who possess skills that have a definite 'market value' (for example, doctors, engineers and other professionals) are rewarded better than the unskilled labourers. Thus, their "class situation" is different from that of the working class and it is they who, in the Weberian framework, constitute the middle classes. Further, unlike Marx, Weber does not see any tendency towards polarization of society into two classes. On the contrary Weber argues that with the development of capitalism, the white collar 'middle class' tends to expand rather than contract.

The later sociologists have tended to follow the Weberian line of thinking in their discussions and studies on the concept of middle class.

A crucial distinction is made in the sociological literature between the "old" middle classes and the "new" middle classes. The term "old" middle class is used in the sense in which Marx had used the term "petty-bourgeoisie" i.e. those who work with their own means of production such as traders, independent professionals and farmers. The term "new" middle class is broadly used to describe the skilled or white-collared workers/ salaried employees and the self-employed professionals. Even though they do not own the means of production they work with, they are distinguished from the unskilled blue-collar workers. Their incomes being much higher than that of the blue-collar workers, they can lead a lifestyle that is very different from that of the working class.

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### 27.3 MIDDLE CLASSES IN THE WESTERN COUNTRIES

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Historically speaking, the term middle class was first used to describe the emerging class of bourgeoisie in Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the initial phase of development of the industrial economy, the bourgeoisie (the new class of merchants and industrialists) stood between the gentry (land owning classes and the aristocracy) on the one hand and the poor working classes on the other. As the industrial economy developed further, the land owning gentry declined and the bourgeoisie — consisting of the big industrialists and financiers — emerged as the ruling class. The term middle class began to be used for the independent small traders, professionals and artisans who stood in between the bourgeoisie on the one side and the working class on the other. These classes grew in number with the development of towns and increasing urbanization that accompanied the development of industrial production. The direct trading between consumers and producers became more and more difficult with growth of big towns and cities. These groups were later called the "old middle classes".

The emergence of “new middle class” is attributed to the further expansion of industrial capitalism and the rise of big corporations with large and complex organizational structures. G.D.H. Cole, a well-known sociologist, attributes the birth of the new middle class to two important developments in the Western economy. First, an increase in the number of public schools and spread of education. And secondly, the spread of joint stock companies. These developments fostered large-scale enterprise and brought into existence a new class of salaried managers and administrators. Lockwood, another sociologist, also attributed the rise of the white-collared salaried class to the developments of corporate capitalism and the emergence of big organization.

#### Activity 1

**Go to a housing complex and try to identify houses belonging to different classes. Make notes on houses with different types of people and jobs. Which would you say belong to the middle class and why? Compare your notes with other students in the study centre.**

The crucial difference between the “old” and the “new middle classes” is their position within the economy. The old middle classes occupied that position by the virtue of their being placed outside the polar class structure. They were neither part of the capitalist class nor of the working class. The new middle classes, on the other hand, did not enjoy any such autonomy. They were part of the big organizations. Their intermediate position came from their place inside the industrial economy. Their growth occurred because of the new demands of modern industry that required the services of a large number of specialists, professionals, technical and administration skills. The “new” middle classes further expanded with growth of the “tertiary” or the servicing sector of the economy. Along with urbanization and industrialization, a large number of tertiary industries, such as banking, insurance, hospitals, hotel, tourism and the mass media developed. These servicing industries employed skilled labour and professionals. The proportion of this segment has been consistently increasing in the total working population in most of the Western industrialized countries. The Western experience seems to have proved Marx wrong. Though the “old” middle classes seem to have declined in strength, the size of the “new” middle classes has been expanding.

## 27.4 MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA

As we have seen above, the middle classes emerged for the first time in Western Europe with the development of industrial and urban economy. We have also seen that the term middle class was initially used to describe the newly emerging class of bourgeoisie/ industrial class. And later on the term was used for social groups placed in-between the industrialist bourgeoisie on the one side and the working class on the other i.e. the skilled professionals.

The historical context of the development of middle classes in Indian is quite different from that of the West. It was in the nineteenth century, under the patronage of the British colonial rule that the middle classes began to emerge in India. Though they emerged under the patronage of the British rulers, the middle classes played an important role in India’s struggle for independence from the colonial rule. During the post-independence period also, the middle classes have been instrumental in shaping the policies of economic development and social change being pursued by the Indian State, Hence the need to understand the middle classes, their history, their social composition and their politics.

## 27.5 RISE OF MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA DURING THE BRITISH RULE

The British colonial rule in India was fundamentally different from all the earlier political systems and empires that existed in the sub-continent. The British not only established their rule over most parts of the sub-continent they also transformed the economy and polity of the region. Apart from changing the land revenue systems, they introduced modern industrial economy in the region. They reorganised the political and administrative structures and introduced Western ideas and cultural values to the Indian people. As

pointed out by the well-known historian of the Indian middle class, B.B. Mishra, the peculiar feature that distinguishes the Indian middle classes from their counter-part in the West is the context of their origin. 'In the West', the middle classes emerged basically as a result of economic and technological change; they were for the most part engaged in trade and industry. In India, on the contrary, they emerged more in consequence of changes in the system of law and public administration than in economic development, and they mainly belonged to the learned profession"(Mishra, 1961:v).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the colonial rulers had been able to bring a large proportion of Indian territory under their rule. It was around this time that, after the success of the Industrial revolution, industrial products from Britain began to flow into India and the volume of trade between Britain and India expanded. They also introduced railways and other modern servicing sectors such as the press and postal departments. A large number of educated individuals were required to staff these administrative institutions. It was not possible to get all of them from Britain. So, in order to fulfill this need, the British opened schools and colleges in different parts of India, particularly in big cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Write a brief note on middle classes in India. Use five lines for your answer.

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2) Write a short note on the rise of the middle classes in India after Independence. Use five lines for your answer.

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Those educated in these new institutions of secular education were to also become a medium through whom the British planned to spread Western ideas and cultural values in the Indian society. Those educated in these institutions were to not only work for the British but they were to also think like them. This intention of creating a native middle class that would become the carrier of Western culture in India was expressed quite openly by Lord Macaulay in 1835. In his Minute on Indian education, Macaulay said: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (as in Varma, 1998:2).

Over the years, a new class emerged in India. Apart from those employed in the administrative jobs of the British government, they included independent professionals, such as, lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists. Membership of this "educated middle class" steadily grew in size during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were mostly concentrated in urban centres and largely came from upper caste backgrounds. By 1911, there were 186 colleges in different parts of India with 36,284 students. This number went up to 231 and 59,595 respectively of colleges by 1921 and students and by 1939, there were 385 colleges teaching 1,44,904 students (Mishra 1961:304).

**Box 27.02**

Some families even sent their children to England for higher education. Apart from returning home with foreign degrees, they also brought with them the new ideas of “liberalism” and “democracy” that had become popular in the West after the French Revolution. Thus, they became carriers of not only the British cultural values but also of the modern ideas of freedom, equality and democracy. Many of them began to critically examine the Indian culture and initiated process of reforming “old” and “outdated” social and cultural practices. The social reform movements that emerged in different parts of India during the nineteenth century, were all led by these newly educated middle class individuals.

Apart from the English educated segment, there were also other sections of the Indian society who could be called the middle classes. The most prominent among them were the petty traders/shopkeepers and independent artisans, the social groups that were called the “old middle classes” in the Western context. Merchants and artisans had always been separate social strata in the traditional structure of social stratification in India. We can easily identify separate castes of merchants and artisans who were an organic part of the village communities. As the economy began to change in response to the new administrative policies of the colonial rulers, many of the merchants moved to newly emerging towns and cities and became independent traders. This process was further accelerated during the post independence period.

Though limited in its significance, the modern machine based industry also began to develop during the colonial period. The establishment of railways, during the middle of the nineteenth century, created conditions for the growth of modern industry in India. The colonial rulers constructed railways primarily for the transportation of raw materials required for the British industry overseas. However, once the railways were established, the British also invested in the local industry such as plantations. The growing economic activity gave boost to trade and mercantile activity and some of the local traders accumulated enough savings and began to invest into the modern industry. The swadeshi movement started by the nationalist leadership gave a boost to the native industry. Apart from giving employment to the labour force, this industry also employed white-collared skilled workers. Thus, along with those employed in administrative positions by the colonial rulers, the white-collared employees of the industrial sector were also a part of the newly emerging middle classes in India.

## 27.6 POLITICS OF MIDDLE CLASSES DURING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Though the middle classes in India emerged under the patronage of the British rule and their members were all educated in the English language and culture, they did not remain loyal to their masters forever. Members of the middle classes not only became actively involved in social reform movements, they also began to raise political questions and in the long run they came to question the legitimacy of the British rule in India. It was the members of these middle classes who provided leadership to the movement for independence. As Varma points out, ‘The educated middle-class elite, which provided all the leaders of the National Movement, came to oppose British rule in the name of the most advanced bourgeois democracy, represented by Britain itself’ (Varma, 1998:21)

**Activity 2**

**Talk to some freedom fighters in your locality. Do they feel that the middle classes were the creation of the Britishers. If so, why? Compare your findings with other students in the study centre.**

The Indian National Congress, particularly during its initial years, was dominated by the professional middle classes. A majority of the active members of the Congress were lawyers, journalists and educationists. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who is known to have transformed the Indian National Congress into a mass movement, was a lawyer and

typically belonged to the professional middle class. Though Gandhi was able to bring peasantry and other segments of the Indian society into the fold of the nationalist movement, the leadership of the Congress party remained middle class and upper caste in character. The British too were 'far more comfortable with the English-knowing, urban-centric middle-class constituents in the Congress than with the unwashed masses' (Varma, 1998:13)

### 27.6.1 Middle Classes in India after Independence

Though different sections of the Indian society had participated in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule, it was the middle classes that took over the institutions of governance from the colonial rulers. It has been argued that the end of the colonial rule did not mean a total break from the past. Much of the institutional structure that had developed during the colonial rule continued to work the independence within the ideology of the new regime. Thus, members of the middle class who were working for the colonial rulers did not loose much in terms of their position in the institutions of governance.

### 27.6.2 Size and Composition

There are no exact figures about the size of this class during the early years of Independence. According to one estimate, its proportion in the total population was around ten percent (Varma, 1998:26) and like middle classes in other societies it was not an undifferentiated monolith. It had its unifying features, both in ideology and aspiration, but within this broadly defining framework it had its segmentations in terms of income, occupation and education. Apart from the middle classes, on the lower side, of were the vast majority of the agricultural poor, peasants and the landless. Unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers, skilled manual workers, petty clerks and employees such as postmen, constables, soldiers, peons were also outside the middle class domain. At the other end of the scale, the upper classes of the Indian society were the rich industrialists and capitalists, the big zamindars and members of the princely families. In between these areas of exclusion, middle classes constituted mostly of officers in the government services, qualified professionals such as doctors, engineers, college and university teachers, journalists and white-collared salaried employees in the private sector. In terms of income, the middle classes are also generally middle income groups. But income as such is not the only defining criteria. For example, a well to do illiterate petty trader could not be counted as a member of the middle class. Thus, more than income, it is education that was considered the common feature of the middle class in different parts of India. This middle class, during the initial years after independence, was also united by a certain ideology, a commitment to development and nation-building. Knowledge of English too was an important characteristic of this class.



Middle classes often live in relatively modest dwellings and congested surroundings

*Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi*



## 27.7 GROWTH OF MIDDLE CLASSES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

India's independence from the colonial rule marked the beginning of a new phase in its history. The independent Indian State was committed, in principle, to democratic institutions of secularism, freedom, justice and equality for all the citizens, irrespective of caste, creed or religion and at all levels — social, economic and political. To achieve these ends, India embarked upon the path of planned development. Plans were chalked out for the development of agricultural, industrial and the tertiary sectors of the economy. There were an overall attempt to expand the economy in all directions. The government of India introduced various programmes and schemes for different sectors of the economy. The execution of these programmes required the services of a large number of trained personnel.

### Box 27.03

**To fulfil increasing demand for trained and skilled personnel, numerous institutions, engineering and medical colleges, technical and management institutes and universities were opened in different parts of the country. On the one hand these institutions fulfilled the growing demand for trained personnel and on the other they provided opportunities to new upwardly mobile groups to fulfil their aspirations for education and social mobility.**

Apart from the increase in a number of those employed in the government sectors, urban industrial and tertiary sectors also experienced an expansion. Though compared to many other countries of the Third World, the growth rate of the Indian economy was slower, in absolute terms the industrial sector grew many folds. Growth in the tertiary sector was more rapid. Increase in population, particularly the urban population, led to a growth in the servicing industry. Banks, insurance companies, hospitals, hotels, press, advertisement agencies all grew at an unprecedented rate, giving employment to a large number of trained professionals.

The next stage of expansion was in the rural areas. Various development programmes introduced by the Indian State after independence led to significant agricultural growth in the regions that experienced Green Revolution. Success of the Green Revolution technology increased productivity of land and made the landowning sections of the Indian countryside substantially richer. Economic development also led to a change in the aspirations of the rural people. Those who could afford it started sending their children not only to English medium schools but also to colleges and universities for higher studies. Consumption patterns also began to change. 'Material goods hitherto considered unnecessary for the simple lifestyle of a farmer, began to be sought. And lifestyles as yet remote and shunned were emulated' (Varma, 1998:95). A new class has emerged in rural India that partly had its interests in urban occupations. The process of agrarian transformation added another segment to the already existing middle classes. In ideological terms, this "new" segment of the middle classes, was quite different from the traditional middle classes. Unlike the old urban middle classes, this new, "rural middle class" was local and regional in character. The members of the rural middle class tended perceive their interests in regional rather than in the nationalist framework. Politically, this class has been on forefront of the movements for regional autonomy.

Another new segment of the middle class that emerged during the post-independence period came from the dalit caste groups. Government policies of positive discrimination and reservations for members of the ex-untouchable/ Schedule castes enabled some of them to get educated and employed in the urban occupations, mostly in the servicing and government sectors. Over the years, a new dalit middle class has thus also emerged on the scene.

## 27.8 LET US SUM UP

Though the middle classes have always been among the most influential segments of the modern Indian society, they were never as prominent and visible as they became during the

decade of 1990s, after the liberalization process of the Indian economy began. Introduction of the new economic policy and increasing globalization of the Indian economy brought the Indian middle class into new prominence.

The process of globalization has also generated a lot of debate about the actual size of middle classes in India, their consumption patterns, and the pace of their growth in the years to come. It has been claimed that the size of middle classes has grown to 20 percent of the total Indian population. Some others have put this figure at 30 percent. Though a large number of Indian people still live a life of poverty, it is the middle classes that have come to dominate the cultural and political life in India today.

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## 27.9 KEY WORDS

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- Domination** : To exploit, and be superordinate. Used in Marxist literature to describe the class which owns the means of production.
- Dichotomous** : Refers in stratification literature to the two class model of Marx,
- Property Relations** : The relations which arise (antagonistic or other) out of one class owning means of production and the other one being employed as wage workers by the class which owns the means of production.

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## 27.10 FURTHER READINGS

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Giddens, A. (1980), *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, London, Unwin Hyman.

Mishra, B.B. (1961), *The Indian Middle Class – Their Growth in Modern Times*, Bombay, Oxford University Press.

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## 27.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The model forwarded for class structure is a dichotomous one. This means he views the structure of society as an exploiting class and an exploited class. Thus property relations are basic to this model. A relatively small production extract the surplus product from the workers classes for Marx are thus defined in relation to means of production. Further control of means of production implies political control of means of production implies political control. In this model the middle classes have only a transitional role, and comprise the self-employed peasants and the petty bourgeoisie — neither of these employed wage labour though they owned means of production, and Marx felt that they would disappear over time.
- 2) i) R. Dahrendorf  
ii) D. Lockwood.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In India middle classes emerged fundamentals as a consequence of changes in the system of law and public administration. Further they mainly belonged to the learned professions Educational institutions and industrialization by the British in India also meant the rise of a middle class.
- 2) It was the middle class that manned the institutions of governance from colonial rulers. Thus there was a sort of continuity from the past. The total proportion of the middle class in the population has been estimated as ten percent. On the other hand were the poor and unskilled and the rich upper classes. Middle classes after independence constituted mainly government officers, doctors, engineers, university teachers all of whom had a moderate income alone.

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# UNIT 28 CLASS CONFLICT

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## Structure

- 28.0 Objectives
- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 Conflict and Competition
- 28.3 The Functionalist View
  - 28.3.1 Criticisms of Functional Approach
- 28.4 Class Conflict Theory
- 28.5 Karl Marx : Views on Class Conflict
  - 28.5.1 Aspects of Class Conflict
  - 28.5.2 Criticism of Marx's Views
- 28.6 The Views of Lewis Coser
- 28.7 Dahrendorf and Class Conflict
- 28.8 C.W. Mills and the Power Elite
- 28.9 Conflict Theory : An Appraisal
- 28.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 28.11 Key Words
- 28.12 Further Readings
- 28.13 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 28.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- describe what is conflict;
- differentiate between conflict and competition;
- provide Karl Marx's views on conflict;
- discuss Coser and Dahrendorf's views on conflict; and
- enumerate the drawbacks of conflict theory.

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## 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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'Conflict' is the deliberate attempt to oppose, resist or coerce the will of another or others. Conflict arises from a clash of interests. Class conflict as such can be defined as a struggle over values, or claims to Status, Power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.

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## 28.2 CONFLICT AND COMPETITION

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The difference between conflict and competition is that :

- i) Conflict always included an awareness of an adversary whereas Competition occurs without actual knowledge of other's existence.
- ii) In competition, two or more parties want something all cannot share, but they do not strive for the purpose of denying or opposing others.

- iii) Competition is always governed by moral norms, fair tactics, while much of Conflict is not.

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## 28.3 THE FUNCTIONALIST VIEW

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The functionalists (Talcott Parsons, Davis and Moore, Tumin) assume that there are certain basic needs or functional pre-requisites which must be met if any society is to survive and function. They assume that parts of society form an integrated whole and examine the ways in which the social stratification system is integrated with other systems of a society to contribute to its functioning. These functional theories have been greatly criticised. Among the critics it is the Conflict theorists who have mainly criticised functionalists as Utopian.

### 28.3.1 Criticisms of Functional Approach

- i) The conflict theorists regard the functionalist approach as Utopian in nature and emphasise the need to study conflict in systems of stratification as a universal, all pervasive and an Omnipresent phenomena.
- ii) The conflict theorists say that all societies are characterised by some degree of constraint, disagreement, uncertainty, control, dysfunctional and coercions that can't be ignored.
- iii) However, unlike the functionalists, the conflict theorists do say that, conflict leads to stability and consensus in society.
- iv) It becomes important to study also the nature of consensus and equilibrium in a given system with conflict.

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## 28.4 CLASS CONFLICT THEORY

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Some of the **basic assumptions** of the Class conflict theory as it has evolved today, can be listed as follows :

- i) Society is not in a state of constant harmony, equilibrium, instead it consists of a structure composed of elements of coercion and subjugation and frequent imbalances are observed in this structure.
- ii) The various elements of this society are in the process of continuous change.
- iii) All these conflicts and changes are acted out in the social atmosphere are called social conflicts.
- iv) Finally these class conflicts are inherent in the very nature of the social structure.

An analysis of society by certain class conflict theorists such as Karl Marx, Coser, Dahrendorf and C.W. Mills have studies class conflict in modern industrial societies.

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## 28.5 KARL MARX : VIEWS ON CLASS CONFLICT

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The main attempt to explain the class conflict theory emerged with from the theory of Karl Marx in his class work on Capitalism. Marx had stated that 'The History of all Hitherto Existing Societies is the History of Class Struggle'. This would mean that any society is fundamentally divided into two realms – Infra-structure and Super-structure.

### Box 28.01

**The Infra-structure consists of the economic-sphere, this was the basic strength giving structure of society and any changes in it would affect the other structures. Marxism shows that all conflicts arise in relation to this economic realm and within it the unequal distribution of means of production.**

Freeman and Slaves, Patrician and Plebeian, Lords and Serfs, in a word Opposer and the Opposed are the names of Social classes in different historical periods. These classes are distinguished from each other by the difference of their respective position in the economy.

Engles and Marx, identified primitive Communism, Ancient, Slave society, Feudal Society, Modern capitalism as principal historical forms of society. The mode of production of each epoch determines the social, political and religious features of society at that particular state in history, as well as the nature of class relations.

### 28.5.1 Aspects of Class Conflict

The Infra-structure in Capitalist society consisted of two rival classes – the Bourgeoisie or the Owners of the means of production (Have's) and the Proletarian or the non-owners (Have-nots). This group works for the former since the main aim of the Bourgeoisie i.e. to achieve maximum profit, he develops inhuman attitude towards the workers, this result in exploitation and alienation of the workers, who because of their feelings of discontentment and deprivation acquire feeling of class-consciousness. These Self-conscious classes then came into conflict with each other in order to protect their own interests.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1). Write a note on aspects of class conflict. Use about 10 lines for your answer.

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- 2) The owners of the means of production in capitalism are known as the  
(Tick the right answer)

- i) proletariat
- ii) bourgeoisie
- iii) power elite
- iv) have not's.

Unlike the Utilitarians who feel that self-interest regulates a harmonious society, Marx felt that this was the fundamental source of conflict. In the case of a capitalist society, the rich capitalists were united on the basis of common political and ideological thinking and this served the same function for them as class-consciousness did for the workers. Once the workers begin to feel that they are being neglected from within the process of production they will seek to change society. According to Marx, this would bring about the destruction of the capitalist system. Here we notice clearly how conflict gives rise to a new value system and how it serves as functional.

Marx's theory of class and class conflict was incorporated into the larger framework of his theory of social change which now forever is helpful for historical and social theories in their analysis of society. However, his theory has been criticised.

## 28.5.2 Criticism of Marx's Views

Marx's theories have subjected to much criticism. Thus:

- i) His pre-occupation with class led him to neglect other social relationships as well as the influence of nationalism and of conflict between nations in history. He also neglected the growing sense of national community in European nations that brought about new moral and social conceptions with emphasise common human interests.
- ii) Marx is also criticised on the grounds of his conception of class division. Evidence shows that 20<sup>th</sup> Century capitalism has created condition where the working class can no longer be regarded as totally alienated. Man's condition has improved along with the general standard of living and the expansion of social services and security of employment.
- iii) Also the growth of a new middle class contradicts the theory of Polarisation of classes. This new class comprising of workers, supervisors, managers etc. introduces an important element of stratification namely social prestige based on occupation, consumption and styles of Lillie.
- iv) Rapid rates of mobility present the persistence of class in Marxian sense, as a result, status group become more important.
- v) The working class remains highly differentiated in terms of skill occupation. Therefore, classes are not homogenous. The expansion of the middle class and the general improvement in the standard of living has led to embugeoisment of the working class.



**In large fortresses of medieval India, the castes adjusted to each other.**

*Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi*

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## 28.6 THE VIEWS OF LEWIS COSER

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Lewis Coser regards conflict as functional for society. He says that social reality is a product of inter-related parts. Imbalances between these parts, give rise to inter-group and intra-group conflicts which is an important element of social interaction. Coser feels that conflict frequently helps to reform existing norms or it contributes to the emergence of new

values in society. In saying this he goes to the extent of saying that a balance of power is a factor in social relationship.

Class/Social conflicts exist most where there is a high frequency of interaction between the members of a society. Coser feels conflict acts like a system of safety valve, to unite individuals to fight against the common enemy.

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## 28.7 DAHRENDORF AND CLASS CONFLICT

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Ralf Dahrendorf feels that class conflict is fundamental to social life and a deviation from normal conditions while developing the dialectic model. As Marx Dahrendorf kept the basic assumption in mind that class conflict arises out of inherent contraindications of all societies into antagonistic groups within functioning institutions. Like Marx, he also talks about two classes related to each other with conflicting tendencies. In other words, divided society into two classes – those with authority and those without authority. These groups have opposite interests. Those with authority want to maintain their status-quo and those without it want to change the structure of authority relations. These groups with collective interests are finally called conflicting classes.

### Box 28.02

**Dahrendorf in spite of being influenced by Marx, did not feel that changing the ownership of production would eliminate conflict. Rather he feels that a revolution would just lead to a new set of antagonistic classes which would perpetuate conflict within society. This is the dialectic model.**

According to Dahrendorf, conflict operates within Imperatively Co-ordinated Associations (ICA) of society, over questions of power and authority. The conflicting relations operating within the ICA's which are units of social action. Such ICA's would be Church's, Chess Clubs etc. Since each ICA is related to other ICA's within the same society, conflict may be both inter-group and intra-group in nature. Within an ICA, there is a hierarchy of positions of power – conflict arises in relation to these positions. Since each society, whatever be its level of development, has various ICA's and each ICA has conflicting relations within it. All ICA's together contribute to conflict within the society as a whole. This conflict may be suppressed or resolved through the mechanism of conflicting allegiances and contribute to the stability as a whole.

According to Dahrendorf a change or progression occurs in class societies from 'quasi groups' which have only underlying or 'latent interests' to a situation where there are 'interest groups' which have a common consciousness. They feel that these are in a similar situation and therefore their interests become clear to all of them – that is these interests become 'manifest'. Thus while sharing latent interests is an important condition it does not suffice to create the progression, which itself demands communal living and other aspects of culture.

### Activity 1

**Which model fits Indian reality best? Is it the functional model or the conflict model? Discuss your analysis with other students in the study centre.**

Thus Dahrendorf posits that class conflict results from the intrinsic structures of authority relations themselves. Dahrendorf argues that it is not the economic relations between superiors/subordinates that results in conflict situations. Their main point however is the authority that one or some have over the other(s). While the boss/employee relationship is conflictual, it is clear that similar conflicts would arise in any organization which has authorities and subordinates e.g. a hospital, university or military battalion.

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## 28.8 C.W. MILLS AND THE POWER ELITE

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C.W. Mills has highlighted the class power structure as seen in the specific case of America. He talked about the division of the society into two classes – Elites and Masses.

Elite means the choicest or the best. It represents a minority group of people who may be socially acknowledged as superior in some sense. The elite theory evolved as a reaction against the Marxian theory of class and opposed the concepts of a classless society, elite rule is inevitable and a classless society in an illusion.

Another aspect of these elite theories is that they criticise the determinism in Marxism but they themselves tend to show this by not merely stressing that every society has been divided into two strata – ruling minority and ruled majority but that all societies must be so divided. Pareto claimed that one type of political society is universal validity of this “Law of elites and masses”.

Marx’s theory stated that in every society, there existed a ruling class, owing the means of production and having political dominance and one or more subject classes. These two are always in conflict which is influenced by the development of productive forces i.e. changes in technology. For Marx, the conflict would result in the victory of the ruling class, ultimately leading to the formation of a classless society. This has been rejected by elite theorists.

As mentioned earlier, C.W. Mills talks about two classes in society, the elite class who rules as opposed to the masses who are ruled. He feels that the power elite comprises of three sections of society namely military, industry and politics. This he calls monokithic power structure of America. These elite groups are further strengthened because of superior educational facilities and powerful family background. The masses are passive recipients and they do not challenge the positions of elites. Hence, the elite group is able to maintain its position in the society.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Give the views of C.W. Mills on the existence of classes in America. Use about five lines for your answer.

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.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 2) Fill in the blanks

The (a)..... consider (b).....

(c)..... to be the principal force producing change.

The Marxists consider class conflict to be the principal force producing change, where the elite theorists attribute change to recurrent decadence of elite, rise of new elite and circulation of elites. The composition of the ruling class changes only with rapid change in the whole system of production and property ownership. This “circulation of elites” or “Social mobility” is an important characteristic of modern societies.

**Activity 2**  
**Does the power elite analysis apply to India? If so, who would comprise the power elite? Talk to various people before reaching your conclusion. Discuss with other students in the study centre.**

**28.9 CONFLICT THEORY : AN APPRAISAL**

We now turn to some of the drawbacks of class conflict theory. We point out that

- i) The conflict school tends to indicate that all conflict and contradictions divide society



into two polar opposites. A clear division of society in this manner is not possible.

- ii) They also assume that the society is in a continuous and unending process of change. This is not true as many traditional societies have not changed very much.
- iii) Further, these theorists tend to always equate conflict with change. They tend to assume that change follows conflict naturally. But it is proved that while conflict may follow change vice-versa may not be true.
- iv) The conflict theorists have failed to differentiate between positive and negative conflicts. They do not acknowledge the facts and conflicts contribute as much as to social integration and stability as to disintegration and change.
- v) And finally these theorists have relied heavily on illustrative materials rather than on empirically verifiable data.

Although the conflict theory over-emphasise its role in society and tries to ignore the role played by contract in maintaining stability in society. It is more rational and non-utopian approach to study class division.

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## 28.10 LET US SUM UP

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Class conflict theory has many shades and has been put forward by as diverse thinkers as Marx and Mills, Coser and Dahrendorf. It is a theory which has developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond have described the various shades of class conflict theory and also pointed out its drawbacks in this unit.

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## 28.11 KEY WORDS

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- Conflict** : A condition where there is opposition between groups of people over working rights and working relationships.
- Class** : A large group of people which are united by commonality of situation and interests. There can be “class in itself” a broadly statistical category or “class of itself” where there is a consciousness regarding other members of the class and a proactive attitude.
- Polarization** : A situation where society has become organized by social processes into two opposing classes, or the “have’s” and the “have not’s”.
- Power Elite** : This comprises the ruling class, which according to Mills is a mix of military, business and political groups.

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## 28.12 FURTHER READINGS

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## 28.13 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Class conflict is associated with Karl Marx’s theories of capitalism where the owners of the means of production and the proletariat or workers were in opposition, antagonistic and alienated from one another. The exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie leads to two violently conflicting social groups and ultimately to revolution or the violent overthrow of the capitalists by the workers.

2) (ii).

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Class structure in America was studied by C.W. Mills who felt that there existed two broad classes the 'elites' and the 'masses'. The elites ruled and came from the most influential backgrounds. In fact for Mills it was the 'power elite' which ruled the masses of America. The 'power elite' according to C.W. Mills comprised of the top military personnel, big commercial establishments and major political leaders. These three groups according to Mills made the major decisions in America.
- 2) (a) Marxists (b) class (c) conflict.



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