

Unit 13

Agrarian Classes and Categories

Contents

- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Marx and Weber on Class
- 13.3 Notions of Agrarian Societies
- 13.4 The Classical Notion of Undifferentiated Peasant Society
- 13.5 Feudalism as a Type of Agrarian Society
- 13.6 Contemporary Agrarian Societies
- 13.7 Class Analysis of Agrarian Societies
- 13.8 Agrarian Social Structure and Change in India
- 13.9 Agrarian Changes during the British Colonial Rule
- 13.10 Agrarian Changes after Independence
- 13.11 Agrarian Class Structure in India
- 13.12 Conclusion
- 13.13 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- ≈ discuss the difference between views of Karl Marx and Max Weber on class;
- ≈ describe the notion of agrarian societies;
- ≈ explain the classical notion of undifferentiated peasant society;
- ≈ critically assess the idea of feudalism as a type of agrarian society;
- ≈ describe the contemporary agrarian societies;
- ≈ discuss the class analysis of agrarian societies;
- ≈ outline the agrarian social structure and change in India;
- ≈ explain the types of agrarian changes that took place during the British colonial rule in India;
- ≈ describe the agrarian changes after India became independent; and finally
- ≈ discuss the agrarian class structure in India.

13.1 Introduction

Agrarian societies are those settlements and groupings of people where livelihood is primarily earned 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. 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. In

exchange, the cultivators were obliged to pay a share of farm produce to the families that served them.

As is the case with other social interactions, all these exchanges are carried out in an institutional framework. The most important aspect of the institutional set-up of agrarian societies is the patterns of land ownership and the nature of relationships among those who own or possess land and those who cultivate them. Those who owned agricultural land do not always cultivate it themselves and often lease it out to tenants or share-croppers. Similarly, those who cultivate their own land or leased-in land from others often employ labour. The terms of employment of labour also vary. Some could employ labour on regular basis, some on casual basis and some others could do so on contractual basis. The form of employment of labour and the nature of relationship that labour has with employer farmers or land owners are important aspects of a given agrarian structure.

The agrarian structure 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 rural society. These sets of relationships among the owners of land and those who provide various forms of services to the landowning groups or work with them for a wage could be described as the agrarian class structure.

13.2 Marx and Weber on Class

A category of people are often described as a class if they share some common properties in a given production process. However, all those involved in the agrarian process in a given society need not constitute a class. Some of them could merely be a category of population with a set of socially defined attributes. The classical sociological thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber, wrote a great deal on the concept of class. Class was the most important conceptual category for Karl Marx in his analysis of human history 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 dominant classes. 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. 'Classes', in the Marxian framework, are thus defined in terms of the relationships that a grouping of people have with the 'means of production'. Further, in Marx's model, economic domination is tied to political domination. Control of means of production yields political power.

Though Max Weber agreed with Marx on the point that classes were 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. Thus, in Weberian framework, the concept of class could not be applied to pre-capitalist peasant societies where the market is only a peripheral phenomenon.

Reflection and Action 13.01

Observe the families in your colony. Think critically about the relationship that your family has with other families in your neighbourhood. In which class or category will you place all of them, in terms of agrarian, semi-rural or urban-based on their occupations? In terms of hierarchy, are all these families at par with yours? If not, make a chart of 10 families in your neighbourhood and place them hierarchically in comparison with your own.

Write a report of one page on “My Family Status” based on your earlier observations and understanding. Compare your report with those of other students at your study centre.

However, in the Marxist theory of history, the concept of class is applicable to all surplus producing societies. But, in his own writings, Marx focused mostly on the urban industrial or capitalist societies of the West. It was left to the later Marxists, particularly Lenin and Mao, to apply the concept of class to the analysis of agrarian societies.

Box 13.01: Marx’s Outlook

“Marx’s philosophical outlook was largely influenced by both Hegel and Hegel’s materialistic successor Ludwig Feurbach. Thus Marx put forward a view of history known as economic determinism. He argued that the mode of production (e.g. hand labour or steam power) was fundamental in determining the kind of economy a society possessed, and the kind of cultural and social structure of that society. The economic base was the sub-structure and the political, religious and artistic features together with social arrangements constituted the super-structure, the latter being conditioned by the former.” (Mitchell G. Duncan, ed. 1968 : 121)

13.3 Notions of Agrarian Societies

In the modern industrial societies the nature of class structure is, in some ways, common everywhere. It is also easier to identify various class groups, such as the working class, the industrialists and the middle classes, in urban industrial societies. The social structures of agrarian societies are, however, 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 fact that in recent times, the agrarian structures 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 working populations. Though the significance of agriculture has considerably declined in countries of the Third world too, it continues to employ a large proportion of their populations. 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 societies.

Further, there are several different perspectives on the subject. There is a very influential group of scholars in the field of agrarian studies who are critical of analysing agrarian societies in class terms. **Peasant societies** for them are 'a type' of population, fundamentally different from the modern urban industrial societies. The classical anthropological writings on the subject conceptualized peasant societies in similar populist terms.

13.4 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, when human beings began to earn their living by cultivating land. They also started living in small settlements. 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 lifestyles.

Peasantry, in this anthropological perspective, was essentially an undifferentiated social formation. In terms of their social and economic organisation, peasants were all similar to each other. They cultivated their own plots of land with the labour of their families and produced primarily for the consumption of their own families. 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. Unlike the "primitive" or "tribal" communities, peasant societies produced surplus, i.e. they produced more than what was enough for the subsistence requirements of their families and for the consumption of those who depended directly on them. This surplus was, however, transferred to the dominant ruling elite, who invariably lived in the city mostly in the form of land tax or land revenue (Wolf 1966).

In cultural and social terms, peasants were seen to be fundamentally different from the modern entrepreneurs. Their attitude towards work and their relationship to 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'". They 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' (Redfield 1965).

Writing in a similar mode during the early twentieth century, a Russian economist, A.V. Chayanov had also argued that the governing logic of the **peasant economies** was different from the modern industrial economies. Unlike the industrial societies where economic process was governed by the principal of profit maximisation and laws of capital, the logic of peasant economy was subsistence oriented. The variation in farm size and productivity of land in the Russian countryside were not guided by the quest for profit or class difference but by the demographic factors. As the size of a household grew the requirements for food and availability of labour power with the household also grew. This directly resulted in an enlargement of the amount of land the household cultivated (working assumption being that the land was anyway available in abundance). However, as the size of the household

declined over time with newer members setting up their own independent households, the holding size also declined (see Harrison 1982 for a summary of Chayanov's theory).

Following this "classical discussion", Theodor Shanin (1987) 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 fulfilment of obligations to holders of political and economic power'. He further identified four interdependent facets of peasant societies:

- 1) Peasant family worked as the basic multi-dimensional unit of social organisation. The family farm operated as the major unit of peasant property, production, consumption, welfare, social reproduction, identity, prestige, sociability and welfare. The individual tended to submit to a formalized family role-behavior and patriarchal authority.
- 2) Land husbandry worked as the main means of livelihood. Peasant farming was characterized by traditionally defined social organization and a low level of technology.
- 3) Peasant societies followed specific cultural patterns linked to the way of life of a small rural community. Peasant culture often conformed to the traditional norms of behaviour and was characterised by face to face relations.
- 4) Peasantry was almost always dominated by outsiders. The peasants were invariably kept at arm's length from the sources of power. Shanin argued that their political subjugation was also interlinked with their cultural subordination and economic exploitation.

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

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 homogenous 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 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.

13.5 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 18th and 19th 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.

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

13.6 Contemporary Agrarian Societies

The spread of industrialisation in the Western countries during the 19th century and in rest of the world during the 20th century has brought about significant changes in the agrarian sector of the economy as well. We can identify two important changes in 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 (ranging from two or three to ten percent) and its contribution to the total national income of these countries is not very high. In the countries of the Third World too, the significance of agriculture has been declining over the years. In India, for example, though a large proportion of the population is still employed in the agricultural sector, its contribution to the total national income has come down substantially. Though it continues to employ more than half of India’s working population, the contribution of agricultural sector to the national income is less than 25 per cent.

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 organisation, such as “feudalism” and “peasant societies” (as discussed above) have disintegrated, giving way to 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 equipments for carrying out farm operations, such as ploughing and threshing. These technological advances made it possible for the landowners to cultivate larger areas of land in lesser time. Scientific researches have also given them chemical fertilizers and high yielding varieties of seeds. The introduction of new farm technologies has not only increased the productivity of land but has also led to significant changes in the social framework of agricultural production.

Reflection and Action 13.02

Visit a village near your own village or a village near your town or city, in case you are living in an urban area. Interview at least two farmers of this village, one who is prosperous and better off, a large landowner, and the second, one who has a very small plot of land. Ask them about :

- i) How many members are there in their family? How many of them are directly related with the tilling of land?
- ii) What kind of dwellings do they live in and how big are they?
- iii) What are the tools and technology they use to produce their crops?
- iv) How educated are the members of their family? and
- v) What, if any, are their links with the towns and cities and how frequently do they make use of these links?

On the basis of this interview write an essay of two pages on “Agrarian classes in village.” Compare your essay with those of other students and discuss your essay with your Academic Counsellor.

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. 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.

The mechanisation of agriculture and its integration in the broader market economy has also in turn transformed the social relations of production, leading to the development of capitalist relations in the agrarian sector. This capitalist development in agriculture has transformed the earlier relations of patronage and loyalty into those that are instrumental in nature. The growing influence of market and money meant that the relations among different categories of population become formalized, without any sense of loyalty or obligation.

However, not everyone benefits from the mechanisation process equally. The market mechanisms put various kinds of economic pressure on cultivating peasants. Some of them get trapped and become indebted eventually, selling off their lands and becoming 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. In other words, this leads to differentiation of the peasantry into new types of groupings. The peasantry gets divided into different strata or classes.

The attitude of the peasants towards their occupation also undergoes a change. In the pre-capitalist or the traditional societies, the peasants 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.

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 homogenous peasantry are a differentiated lot. They are divided into different categories or classes.

13.7 Class Analysis of Agrarian Societies

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. Using the Marxist method of class analysis, Lenin, during the early twentieth century, offered an analysis of the agrarian setting and class differentiation of the peasantry in Russia in his well known piece of writing the *Preliminary Draft Thesis on the Agrarian Question*. Similarly, in *How to differentiate the classes in Rural Areas*, Mao Tse Tung, the leader of the Chinese revolution applied the Marxist concept of class in his analysis of the Chinese peasantry. Over the years, the writings of Lenin and Mao have become the basis for understanding agrarian class structures in different societies.

Lenin and Mao suggested that with the development of capitalism in agriculture, the peasantry, that was hitherto an undifferentiated social category, gets differentiated or divided into various social classes. On the basis of their experience, they identified different categories of peasants in Russia and China respectively and the nature of relations the different categories had with each other. On the basis of their writings, we can broadly identify five or six agrarian classes. They would be the **landlords**, the owners of large tracts of land who do not work on land directly. They generally lease their lands out to tenants. They are a conservative class and do not like agricultural developments, which they fear, could weaken their hold over the rural society. **The rich peasants** are those who own substantial areas of land. They invariably lease out a part of their land to tenants but have direct interest in land. Once they begin to use modern technology, they begin to employ wage labour and become capitalist farmers. **The middle peasants** do not own much land but have enough for their own needs. They typically work with their family labour. Neither do they employ wage labour nor do they work as labourers with others. **The poor peasants** do not own much land. In order to survive they invariably have to supplement their income through wage labour. **The landless labourers** or agricultural proletariat are tenants, share-croppers who end up losing their lands when capitalism begins to develop in agriculture. They survive basically by hiring out their labour power to rich peasants.

These, according to Lenin, were *transitional* categories. With further development of capitalism in agriculture, there would be a tendency towards polarization of the agrarian population into two classes, the big capitalist farmers on one side and a large number of rural proletariat on the other.

However, the actual empirical experience of capitalist development in agriculture in different parts of the world does not seem to entirely conform to Lenin's prediction. Though agriculture has been gradually integrated into 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 polarized 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 actually gone up.

13.8 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, one must also take the specific context into account while doing so.

As mentioned above, 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 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.

However, participation in this system of reciprocal exchange was not on an equal footing. 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.

Within this general framework, the actual structures of agrarian relations differed from region to region. While in some parts of the sub-continent, the influence of Brahmanical ritualism was strong, in some other regions the peasant values were stronger. This had a direct influence on the relative position of Brahmins and landowning castes in the given agrarian setting.

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.

13.9 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 maximize their revenues from land, 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, Bihar, and in parts of Madras and the United Province, they conferred full ownership rights over the erstwhile zamindars who 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. 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. The poorer among them 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 for working hard to improve their lands. As a result the agricultural production declined. The colonial rulers also enforced changes in the cropping pattern and made the local peasant produce cash crops like cotton rather than food grains as they needed cotton for textile mills in England. All this led to frequent famines and general misery of the peasantry. The big landowners gained at the cost of the small and poor peasants.

13.10 Agrarian Changes after Independence

The nationalist leadership during the struggle for freedom from colonial rule had mobilized peasantry on the promise of a better life. Leaders of the Indian National Congress had started talking about the urgent need of agrarian reforms even before they took over the reins of power from the colonial rulers in 1947.

The process of Land Reforms was initiated almost immediately after Independence. The central government directed the state governments to pass legislations that would abolish intermediary landlords, the zamindars, and would grant ownership rights to the actual tillers of the land. Some legislations were intended to 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.

Box 13.02: Factors of Social Change in Rural India

Dreze & Sen (1997 : p. 17) say that both 'Zamindari Abolition' and the development in agricultural practices in Western Uttar Pradesh were two episodes, not very dramatic in their impact in themselves (compared with for e.g. land reforms and productivity growth in other developing regions, including parts of India) they do define the broad parameters of change in the economic circumstances of the bulk of the population. The land reforms limited the powers of large feudal landlords, and gave ownership rights to a vast majority of tenant farmers who previously did not own land.

However, though the legislations were passed by all the states, only in some parts of the country the desired effects could be achieved. The evaluative studies of Land Reforms have often pointed out that only in those parts of the country where peasants were politically mobilized and the local state government had the right kind of 'political will', the land reforms could be effectively implemented. Similarly, some legislations, such as those on zamindari abolition were much more successful than those on the ceilings (see Joshi 1976).

The government of free India also initiated several other developmental programmes intended 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 fertilizers at subsidized 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.

Box 13.03: 'Green Revolution' and Social Mobility

During the 1960's and 1970's the adoption of modern agriculture practices in Western Uttar Pradesh and their subsequent diffusion in parts of Haryana and Punjab regions came to be known as 'Green Revolution'. It led to a general prosperity of the region. Yogendra Singh (1988 : 5) points out that the "Green Revolution" signifies not merely growth in agricultural production but also the use of new technology and new social relationships in production processes. These developments make this phase of changes in rural economy and society distinctive. A new interaction between technology, social relationship and culture is now taking place in rural society. This has resulted in social mobility, emergence of new power structures and modes of exploitation of the deprived classes. It has generated new contradictions in society.

Apart from increasing productivity of land, these changes have transformed the social framework of 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 formalized arrangements among the land owning 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 (see Thorner 1982; Patnaik 1990; Jodhka 2003).

13.11 Agrarian Class Structure in India

As mentioned above, traditional Indian society was organized 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 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 agricultural land in most parts of India is still owned by the traditional cultivating caste groups, their relations with the landless menials are no more regulated by the norms of the 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' (Dhanagare, 1983). 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 categorize the Indian agrarian population into a framework of social classes was that of a well-known economist, Daniel Thorner (1956).

Thorner suggested that one could divide the agrarian population of India into different class categories by adopting 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.

- 1) **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. They could be further divided into two categories, a) the big landlords, holding rights over large tracts extending over several villages; they are absentee owners/rentiers with absolutely no interest in land management or improvement; b) the rich landowners, proprietors with considerable holdings but usually in the same village and although performing no field work, supervising cultivation and taking personal interest in the management and improvement of land.
- 2) **Kisans** are working peasants, who own small plots of land and work mostly with their own labour and that of their family members. They own much lesser lands than the Maliks. They too can be divided into two sub-categories, a) small landowners, having holdings sufficient to support a family; b) substantial tenants who may not own any land but cultivate a large enough holding to help them sustain their families without having to work as wage labourers.
- 3) **Mazdoors**, who do not own land themselves and earn their livelihood primarily by working as wage labourers or sharecroppers with others.

Thorner's classification of agrarian population has not been very popular among 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 peasants as some Marxist analysts had predicted. On the contrary, the size of middle level cultivators has swelled.

The classification that has been more popular among the students of agrarian social structure and change in India is the division of the agrarian population into five or six classes. In terms of categories these have all been taken from Lenin-Mao schema, but in terms of actual operationalisation, they are invariably based on ownership of land, which invariably also determines their relations with other categories of population in the rural setting, as also outside the village.

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 organize 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 fertilizers 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 landlords command more influence in the backward regions, the power of 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 fertilizers 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 percent 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 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 employers, but invariably also of choosing their political representatives.

This is only a broad framework. As suggested above, the actual relations differ from region to region. The agrarian history of different regions of India has been quite diverse and the trajectories of development during the post-independence period have also been varied.

13.12 Conclusion

Agrarian classes and categories are societies which depend largely on agriculture as their main source of sustenance. As you read in the above unit agrarian settlements and groupings of people depend for their livelihood on cultivating land and by carrying out related activities such as animal husbandry. Like all other economic activities, agricultural production is obviously an economic activity and as such is carried out in a framework of social relationships. Those involved in cultivation of land also interact with each other in different social capacities. Not only do they interact with each other but also with other categories of people who provide them with different types of services required for cultivation of land.

The social, economic and cultural interaction of different classes and categories of people takes place in an institutionalised framework. The most important aspect of the institutional set-up of agrarian societies is the pattern of landownership and the nature of relationships among those who own or possess land and those who till the land or do the actual cultivation. The form of employment of labour and the nature of relationship that labour has with their employer farmers or land owners are important aspects of a given agrarian structure. You learnt in the above unit that those who own land invariably command a considerable degree of power and prestige in rural society. These sets of relationships among the owners of land and those who provide various forms of services in the landowning groups or work with them for a wage could be described as the agrarian class structure.

What is a class? The views of leading scholars and thinkers like Karl Marx and Max Weber vary on this issue. Class for Marx is a dichotomous one. He says that in every class society, there are two fundamental classes. Property relations constitute the main criteria on the basis of this dichotomous system. For Max Weber, class depends on the 'market situation' or the purchasing power of a person. The class status of a person also determines his/her life chances. Thus, in Weberian framework, the concept of class could not be applied to pre-capitalist peasant societies where market is only a peripheral phenomenon. In comparison, the concept of class is applicable to all surplus producing societies.

The social structures of agrarian societies are, however, marked with diversities of various kinds. The nature of agrarian class structure varies from region to region. In recent times, the agrarian structures in most societies are undergoing fundamental transformations. In most developed societies of the West, agriculture has become a marginal sector of the economy, employing only a very small proportion of their working populations. In the Third World too, the ratio of population dependent on agriculture has begun to decline but it still employs considerable sections of the population.

There is an influential group of scholars in the field of agrarian studies who are critical of analysing agrarian societies in class terms. Peasant societies for them are 'a type' of population fundamentally different from the modern urban industrial societies.

Then you learnt about the classical notion of undifferentiated peasant society. This notion developed during the post-war period (after 1945). It was largely derived from the Western experience. A typical peasant society was seen to be pre-industrial in nature. As the economics developed with the onset of the industrial revolution, the traditional “peasant way of life” gradually began to change, giving way to modern urban lifestyles.

Theodor Shanin (1987) 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 fulfilment of obligations to holders of political and economic power.” The historical literature on different regions of the world tends to show that the agrarian societies were not as homogenous 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 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.

With the success of industrial revolution during the 18th and the 19th centuries, feudal societies disintegrated, giving way to the development of modern capitalist economics. 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, besides Europe.

This Unit also discussed the kinds of fundamental transformations that have taken place in contemporary agrarian societies. Increased mechanisation of agriculture, advanced technology and communications have all led to a shift in the pattern of social network of interaction. Increased yield, due to the intervention of science and technology, improved seeds, etc. led to a situation where surplus food is generated. The idea of ‘cash crops’ is introduced which further increased the distance between the rich and the poor. Therefore, social inequity increases, feudal values are lost or decline but instead market relations take over in the rural agricultural sector.

The attitude of the peasants towards their occupation also undergoes a change, as you read earlier. In the pre-capitalist or traditional societies, the peasants produced mainly for their own consumption. The work in 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. But in modern times, landowners begin to look at agriculture as an enterprise. They work on their farms with modern machines and produce ‘cash crops’ which fetch higher prices in the market and therefore generate more money. Thus, profit motive becomes part of agricultural enterprise.

Lenin and Mao, two well known leaders from Russia and China, suggested that with the development of capitalism in agriculture, the peasantry that was hitherto an undifferentiated social category, gets differentiated or divided into various social classes. On the basis of their experience, they identified different categories of peasants respectively in Russia and China and the nature of relations the different categories had with each other.

However, that actual experience of capitalist development in agriculture in different parts of the world does not seem to entirely conform to Lenin's prediction. There is very little evidence to support the argument that the agrarian population is getting polarised into two classes. In the West, as in the Third World countries, the middle and small size cultivators have not only managed to survive but in some countries like India, their numbers have increased.

Traditionally agrarian societies in India were marked by a pattern of relationship called the "Jajmani system" where the different classes were interdependent on each other in terms of service. The land owners were the patrons or jajmans and the service providing castes were the 'Kamins' such as, the caste of carpenters, ironsmiths, etc. But gradually, after Independence, this system has declined. The two significant reasons which led to this decline were the abolition of Zamindari system and the Green Revolution.

The process of modernisation and development initiated by the Indian state during the post-Independence period 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 nearly disappeared. The agrarian class/caste structure is still the same; but it is not defined by caste any more as it traditionally used to be. The landless members of lower castes now work with the cultivating farmers as agricultural labourers. We can, therefore, say that in this sense, caste has given way to class in the Indian countryside.

Finally, in this unit you have learnt about the classification of agrarian population of India into different class categories. One of the well known sociologists who has done this is Daniel Thorner (1956). He divided agrarian class structure into three types, maliks, kisan and mazdoors, based on their relationship with the land.

13.13 Further Reading

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Unit 14

The Working Class

Contents

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Defining Working Class
- 14.3 A Brief History of the Working Class
- 14.4 Working Class : The Indian Scenario
- 14.5 Growth of Working Class in India
- 14.6 Social Background of Indian Working Class
- 14.7 Conclusion
- 14.8 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- ≈ define what is meant by the term ‘working class’;
- ≈ provide a brief history of working class generally;
- ≈ describe the working class in the Indian scenario;
- ≈ discuss the growth of working class in India; and
- ≈ explain the social background of the Indian working class.

14.1 Introduction

Some level of inequality has existed in all societies since time immemorial. All societies have been stratified, in the sense that all valued resources such as wealth, income and power have been unequally distributed. But inequalities were neither similar in all societies nor in all epochs. In medieval Europe societies were divided into order or estates resulting in groups of people known as aristocracy, peasantry, burghers and church. Each group had prescribed roles and associated legal rights and duties. At other places slavery was widely practised wherein slaves virtually had no social rights. In our own country, as you have learnt earlier, society was traditionally stratified into castes. The castes groups enjoyed different degrees of religious purity and pollution. The remnants of stratification based on caste are still visible, though in a modified form.

The Industrial Revolution took place in the middle of the 18th century in England. This led to wide ranging changes in society. It introduced new concepts such as industry, secularisation and community. New forms of stratification based on ‘class’ became prominent during this period. Though the term ‘class’ itself was not new, it acquired new meaning with other emerging concepts. This system of inequality was clearly different from older and known forms of stratification. First, classes were open whereas estates or castes were closed systems. There was no legal or religious barrier, which prevented the mobility of the individual in class hierarchy. In other words, class position could be achieved rather than being ascribed. Second, members of all classes have the same legal rights and duties. In effect all were judged by same laws and courts. Finally, unlike older forms of inequality, economic success was the sole criteria for determining class position.

In older systems of inequality individuals were grouped together in categories, which were polar opposites. Hence there were lords and serfs, master and slave and in our own society we had pure and impure castes. Similarly, in class-based stratification also there were bourgeoisie and proletariat (Marxian terms). A careful analysis reveals that membership in all such groups were essentially determined by economic relations. In Marxian terminology, relations of production determined the class position i.e. those who own the 'means of production' and those who sell their labour for wages. This brings us to the focus of this unit i.e. to discuss 'those who sell their labour' in class-based societies. Such people have been labelled as 'Working Class'. However, Marx himself never used this term to denote them.

14.2 Defining Working Class

The question 'who and what is working class' is not an easy one to answer. There are several reasons for this. The working class is not a cohesive entity and it has numerous differences and contradictions. There is a problem of where to draw the line. Who belongs to the working class and who does not? The difference further extends in terms of skill, sex, age, income and caste. Hence the working class is a complex, contradictory and constantly changing entity. But it is an entity – in other words, there is a group of people denoted as 'working class', who are not just a sum of people. Even though there are differences and contradictions within the working class, they need to be recognised and analysed. So then, can we have a single definition of working class? The answer is that one cannot have a single definition which will be all inclusive. This is because of the blurring of boundaries between classes and the different working class. For example, a worker in 1970 is not the same as a worker in 2005. That is, the composition, the size and the character of a class changes over a period of time. Therefore the requirement is of a series of definitions, which have to change in accordance with the changes in social structure.

Reflection and Action 14.01

Observe the labourers working in various capacities - road construction; house construction; digging wells; cleaning drains, etc. Take note of workers in factories, offices, dhabas and shops who are at the lower rung of the socio-economic scale.

Recall your experience of workers in other sectors of the economy, as well, and give a definition of the 'working class' which you think is suitable to define the wide range of diverse types of workers. Compare your definition with those of other students at your Study Centre.

In the Marxian scheme, the capitalist society is characterised by two principal classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Bourgeoisie owns the means of production and proletariat sell their labour for wages in order to live. The Marxist meanings of these terms have been specified clearly by Engels in a footnote to the 'Communist Manifesto'. By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, and by proletariat the class of modern wage-labourers. Hence, bourgeoisie is synonymous with the capitalist and proletariat with the working class.

In recent years, the Marxist view on the working class has been countered essentially by two views giving contradictory analysis. The first view is that

working class is literally disappearing. With the automation of industry and apparent displacement of blue-collar jobs, the working class is fast shrinking in size. However, the fact is that it is not the working class as a whole that is disappearing, but blue-collar workers are disappearing. The second view states the opposite. In this view all society is becoming working class. That is, students, teachers, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and salaried employees of various kind are all workers. The working class is not disappearing by elimination, but is in fact expanding with everybody joining it except a few capitalists at the top. This view emphasizes the so-called blurring of class boundaries but overlooks the important social distinctions between classes. Moreover those distinctions are still very much prevalent in society.

However, the question still remains – who are the working class? As M. Holmstorm (1991) puts it ‘people commonly refer to industrial workers, and sometimes other kind of wage-earners and self-employed workers, as the ‘working class’. Usually this means a group who share similar economic situation, which distinguishes them from others, like property owners, employers and managers. It suggests a common interest and shared consciousness of these interests’. This implies that like other classes the defining feature of working class is their understanding of ‘a common interest’ and ‘shared consciousness’. However, in recent times these two concepts have become difficult to actualise for the working class due to their own internal divisions and diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

It is worthwhile to ask that given multiple divisions and subdivisions among the working class, such as organised formal or unorganised informal industrial workers, casual general labourers, the self employed and small peasants, does any type of ‘common interest’ exist? Or are various types of workers different classes with different and conflicting interest? Or do these classes think or act as if they were classes with distinct interests either in their everyday life, at work or at home?

It is difficult to find answers to these questions. The reason is that ‘consciousness’ per se becomes a tricky word, when used for working class consciousness. One of the problems in dealing with the working class is that one is dealing with people who do not have vocal or written expressions of their ideas or beliefs. Even in labour movements or in trade union movements, it is the non-worker labour leaders who make speeches not the worker. The other element is that the working class is a totality that goes far beyond the ordinary intellectual view of consciousness. It is an objective category. The usual way of viewing consciousness is in terms of formal statement of belief. However, in terms of working class and its living reality, this simply does not work. The problem is compounded by the fact that studies of consciousness tend to assume that consciousness is overwhelmingly a matter of mind, of verbalizations. A worker, however, does not have a public platform or press. Hence, verbal responses to formal questions, given the limited range of alternatives allowed to workers in such situations, inevitably give a picture of working class consciousness that is much more conservative than the underlying reality.

14.3 A Brief History of The Working Class

The history of the working class can be divided in several eras for simplicity of presentation. Though one tends to see the working class as an offshoot of capitalism, the early roots could be found in pre-capitalism also.

- a) **Pre-Capitalism:** There has been a very small working class since the time of the Roman, Greek and Chinese empires. That is, there have been people who were wage labourers rather than artisans from these times. Industries such as iron and coal mining for instance were modelled on capitalistic styles of production long before capitalism itself. As these types of workers were few and far between, they could not be seen as a class.
- b) **Early Capitalism:** The growth of capitalism witnessed a huge mushrooming of cities and necessitated the creation of a huge working class. Exorbitant cost of machinery and power meant that small-scale production was neither competitive nor possible. Peasants were driven from the land to cities through enclosure acts etc. So, for the first time, there were huge numbers of people who shared a common life experience of living and working close to each other.
- c) **Capitalism:** In capitalism this new group of people started to define themselves. The process which allowed such emergence of the new class consciousness was the concentration of people who worked together into same geographical areas in situations of grinding poverty. It was clear to the workers that their neighbours and work partners were starving and owners of the means of production were taking the entire surplus. In this regard it is important to mention that capitalism maintained itself through brute force best exemplified by the crushing of the 'Paris commune' and attacks on the 'Chartists' in Britain.
- d) **During world war:** Despite a widespread denunciation of the forthcoming war as late as 1912 by the left parties worldwide and pledges by the millions of workers not to fight, in the end, all left parties rallied behind their ruling class. Those that opposed the war outright were a small section of the working class, most notably Bolsheviks in Russia and the bulk of anarchist movement. The mass socialist parties which had developed out of struggles around Europe meekly led their members off to the slaughter. The war saw huge mutinies and revolution in Russia and indeed was to end with a workers' rising in Germany. This was the first time that throughout Europe socialist parties chose to work with the ruling class.

Box 14.01: Stalinism

Under Stalinism, the new method of social control had developed in USSR. This method relied on placing power in the hands of the 'state' instead of individual bosses. This had important effects on the working class. First, the working class was assured that they were living under socialism. Secondly, the fact that the factor that determined standard of living was access to resources rather than wealth per se tended to lead to individual solutions rather than collective ones. Moreover, wherever collective actions occurred, it was ruthlessly stamped on preventing the development of a tradition of successful collective action. The initial euphoria of the working class soon turned to despair as the Communist Party along with the state bureaucracy made itself the representative of the working class.

- e) **Post war to 70's:** In this period there was a boom of industrialisation and bosses all around the world. The standard of living of the working class rose drastically. Since the late 60's onwards the idea that class struggle politics was over became popular. A cure for the periodic recession that capitalism had gone through, had been found and the picture for everyone was rosy. It was also a period where the working

class was fragmented by the introduction of cheap mass transport, cheap housing and the reduction of societies to a body composed of individual families. Now the workers no longer lived near their work partners, but lived in huge housing colonies with few social resources.

Box 14.02: Role of Mass Media

A new method of social control was also found during the 70's which was owned by the capitalists. This method was the use of mass media such as television. This further helped in the fragmentation of the working class due to continuous hammering of capitalist ideologies and goodies. However, on the flip side, television also helped in fostering the development of newer forms of class struggle. In other words, the imperfection of capitalism was beamed into the living rooms of everyone. This helped in developing a new sense of consciousness among the working class, which was not only trans-regional in nature but also trans-national. Hence, the atrocities of capitalism in one part of the world sparked protests in another corner of the world.

- f) **The 80's:** The 70's ended in industrial discontent the world over, as the rate of increase in the standard of living slowed and began to move in the reverse direction. The post war boom ended and capitalism suddenly found itself unable to afford the concessions it had offered to the working class in return of peace. The increasingly multi-national character of capitalism started to have profound effects on the structure of the working class all over the world. The large scale, unskilled and semi-skilled heavy engineering, mining and assembly plants began to close in the first world or shifted to the cheaper third world countries. The rate of profit in manufacturing began to decline to the extent that money made through speculation was far greater than investment in the manufacturing unit. In the name of reducing overhead costs, the large-scale workforce was shackled. This was the best example of decimation of large-scale workplaces and communities which consequently led to further fragmentation of the working class. This era also witnessed creation of many more 'white collar' jobs which gave rise to the new middle class. The need to service the new growing middle class composed of speculators and dealers led to huge growth in the service sector. There was also greater reduction of permanent employment, hence a new sector of employment came up called the voluntary sector. Most of the jobs lost were full time and unionised, most of those created were part-time and anti-union. One final significant change was the huge increase in the numbers of women workers, in part due to the fact that many new jobs were part-time and generally badly paid.
- g) **The Working Class Today:** The nature of working class today is quite different from that a hundred years ago. In the late 80's a large section of left parties viewed this as meaning that socialism was no longer possible. Hence the best possible option is to form a rainbow alliance, which would attempt to limit the excesses of capitalism.

14.4 Working Class: The Indian Scenario

India has a multi-structural economy where a number of pre-capitalist relations of production co-exist with capitalist relations of production. Correspondingly, here a differentiated working class structure exists i.e. the numerous types of relations of production, consumption and accumulation of surplus combine to produce a variety of forms of the existence of the working class. This is

further compounded by the structural features of Pan-Indian society along with local conditions. So the composition of the working class is affected by the caste, tribe, ethnic origin and the gender based division of labour between male and female and associated patriarchy. This implies that despite internal structural differences and the relations of productions through which working people have been and continues to be, there exists a group of people denoted as 'working class'. Then, it becomes pertinent to analyse the growth of working class in India. This is particularly so, when one considers two facts. First, in India prior to 19th century there were vast numbers of working people not working class. Second, the growth of capitalist mode of production along with industrialization was imposed by the colonial masters.

14.5 Growth of Working Class in India

The modern working class came into being with the rise of capitalist mode of production. This mode of production brought with it the factory type of industry. In other words, rise of factory system of production and working class happened simultaneously. Conversely, without a factory industry there can be no working class but only working people.

Traditional Indian economy and encounter with colonialists

In India, as mentioned above, till the middle of the 19th century, there were working people but not the working class. In other words, Indian economy was characterized by what Marx termed as '....small and extremely ancient Indian communities... are based on the possession in common land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on the unadulterated division of labour, which serves, wherever a new community is started...'. The colonial rule and exploitation of British Imperialists completely ruined the system of production of these traditional and self-sufficient societies. Though the process started with victory in the battle of Plassey in 1757, the process was fastened with forced introduction of British capital, wherein the old economic system and division of labour was completely shattered. The surplus generated through the old system fell into the hands of the colonialists who then started direct plundering and exporting of the wealth of India to England. Simultaneously, the English capitalists felt the need of marketing in India the industrial products of England. Hence from 1813 onwards the door of free trade with India was opened not only for East India Company but for other British companies also. This was coupled with the imposition of heavy import duty ranging from 70 to 80 per cent on the cost of imported Indian textile and silk products in England. The combined result of these was that Indian economy suffered doubly – that is, not only was the textile industry ruined, but also the artisans were forced to starve. The same scenario existed in Indian metallurgical and other industries. Moreover, Indian raw material was an indispensable item for the development of British manufacturing industry. Hence, colonialists followed the trading policy whereby they not only flooded the Indian market with British industrial products but maintained the constant supply of Indian raw materials and agricultural products to England. In a word, as Sukomal Sen (1997) puts, India was transformed into an agrarian and raw material adjunct of capitalist Britain, simultaneously preserving feudal methods of exploitation. The result of this process was that 'Indian craftsmen were forced out from their age-long profession. The ancient integrating element of the unity of industrial and agricultural production unique in the traditional economy was shattered and the structure of Indian society disintegrated' (Sukomal Sen 1997).

i) The formative period

The forced intrusion of British capital in India devastated the old economy but did not transplant it by forces of modern capital economy. So, traditional cottage industry and weavers famed for their skill through the centuries were robbed of their means of livelihood and were uprooted throughout India. This loss of the old world with no new gains led to extreme impoverishment of the people. The millions of ruined artisans and craftsmen, spinners, weavers, potters, smelters and smiths from the town and the village alike, had no alternative but to crowd into agriculture, leading to deadly pressure on the land. Subsequently, with the introduction of railways and sporadic growth of some industries, a section of these very people at the lowest rung of Indian society who had been plodding through immense sufferings and impoverishment in village life entered the modern industries as workers. The first generation of factory workers, it appears, came from this distressed and dispossessed section the village people. In the words of Buchanan... “the factory working group surely comes from the hungry half of the agricultural population, indeed almost wholly from the hungriest quarter or eighth of it”. The factory commission of 1890 reports that most of the factory workers in jute, cotton, bone and paper mills, sugar works, gun and shell factories belonged to the lower castes like *Bagdi*, *Teli*, *Mochi*, *Kaibarta*, *Bairagi* and *Sankara*. They also belonged to the caste of *Tanti* or Weavers. In coal mines the largest single group were *Bauris*, a caste of very low social rank, the majority of whom were under *royts* or landless labourers. The next largest group in coal mining were the *Santhals*, a tribe of crude agriculturists. The remaining section of miners were recruited from similar groups and also from displaced labourers and menials from villages. Among the immigrant labourers in the coalfields, such castes as *Pasis*, *Lodhs*, *Kurmis*, *Ahirs*, *Koeris*, *Chamars* and lower caste Muslims were also there.

However, other studies point out a different pattern of migration of workers from the village. The early working class was not the poorest of the poor. Buchanan's views were based on deduction. The studies of Monis and Chandavarkar show that the lowest castes did not join the industries. Kalpana Ram's study of mine workers also shows something similar. There were 2 reasons for this. The wages were very low and it was not possible for the poor to migrate to the city with their families and work in factories. It would be difficult to maintain a family on low wages. Hence both Monis and Ram note that initially middle castes – those with some land – migrated. Their families stayed behind and the worker would send small amounts of money to supplement the family earning/subsistence from land. Dalits/lower castes did not migrate, or they could not migrate, as they were required to do the unclean activities in the village. Secondly, being landless, they could not subsist on those meagre earnings. Migration of lower castes took place later (after 30-40 years) due to two reasons. The factories (jute and cotton) faced labour shortage, hence wages were increased. Secondly, there was pressure from the British Govt. on the village community to allow untouchables to migrate outside the village.

The view expressed earlier in this unit is Buchanan's and also Max Weber's who had written that industrialisation in India attracted the low castes and the dregs of society.

ii) Emergence of working class

With the growth of modern factory industries, the factory workers gradually

shaped themselves into a distinct category. The concentration of the working class in the cities near the industrial enterprises was an extremely important factor in the formation of the workers as a class. Similar conditions in factories and common living conditions made the workers feel that they had similar experiences and shared interests and react in similar fashion. In other words, the principal factors underlying the growth and formation of the working mass as a class in India in the latter half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, I bear similarities with the advanced countries of Europe. Hence, the consciousness of being exploited by the capitalists/ owners of factories was evident as early as 1888, when workers of Shyamnagar Jute Mill assaulted the manager Mr. Kiddie. That is, the reactions against the exploitation in early phases were marked by riots, affrays, assaults and physical violence.

Side by side with these forms of protest there were also other forms of struggle characteristic of the working class. Typical working class actions such as strike against long hours of work, against wage cuts, against supervisors extortion were increasing in number and the tendency to act collectively was also growing. As early as 1879/80 there was a threat of a strike in Champdani Jute Mill against an attempt by the authorities to introduce a new system of single shift which was unpopular with workers. Presumably because of this strike threat the proposed system was ultimately abandoned. However, the process of class formation among workers in India was marked by fundamental differences as opposed to their European counterparts. It had far reaching consequences on the growth of the Indian working class. These differences were –

- a) Though in Europe also the artisans and craftsmen were dispossessed of their profession, they were not forced out of towns to crowd the village economy. They found employment in the large industries as soon as they were dispossessed of their old professions. In India, after the destruction of traditional handicraft and cottage industry, modern industry did not grow up in its place. The dispossessed artisans and craftsmen were compelled to depend on the village economy and earn livelihood as landless peasants and agricultural labourers.
- b) The gap between destruction of traditional cottage industry and its partial replacement by modern industries was about two to three generations. The dispossessed artisans and craftsmen lost their age-old technical skill and when they entered the modern industries, they did so without any initial skills.
- c) When the workers, after long and close association with agricultural life, entered the modern industries and got transformed into modern workers, they did it in with the full inheritance of the legacy and various superstitions, habits and customs of agricultural life. There was no opportunity for these men to get out of casteism, racialism and religious superstition of Indian social life and harmful influence of medieval ideas. They were born as an Indian working class deeply imbued with obscurantist ideas and backward trends. However, this feature they shared with some of their European counterparts, as well, such as the British working class who too had suffered similar problems.

These peculiarities accompanying the birth of Indian workers acted as hindrances to the development of their modern outlook and class consciousness. In fact the Indian workers were not the only workers

characterised by these peculiarities, rather these were general characteristics of the working class of the colonies and sub-colonies.

iii) Consolidation of the working class

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was marked by the organised national movements and consolidation of the working class. The national movement, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra had already assumed a developed form which exerted a great impact on the later national awakening of the entire country. The partition of Bengal in the year 1905 aroused bitter public indignation and gave rise to mass national upsurge. This political development worked as a favorable condition for the Indian working class too for moving ahead with its economic struggles and raising them to a higher pitch. The period from the beginning of the century till the outbreak of the first world war was marked with widespread and dogged struggles of the workers which were not only economic struggles, but political struggles also. That is, these struggles led to the laying of the foundation of the first trade unions of the country. Moreover, the turn of the century was also marked by the advance in industrialization with concomitant swelling of the working class in numerical strength.

Box 14.03: Trade Unions

In order to defend themselves from the collective might of the employers and the state, the working class organised themselves into trade unions so that they could increase their bargaining power through unity. Therefore trade unions emerged from the spontaneous efforts of the working class. They were not organisations that were preplanned on the basis of some theoretical formulation. In India, the crystallisation of organisations of workers into trade unions took place after the First World War. (IGNOU 2004, BLD-102 Evolution of Workers Organisation 1, Unit 1&2)

On the eve of the First World War, the capitalist development in India got accelerated. There was increase in the number of joint stock company i.e. in 1900 the number of joint stock firms was 1360, which in 1907 rose to 2166. It marked the further increase at the beginning of the first world war when the number of registered firms stood at 2553. However, with the outbreak of war the colonial exploitation of India assumed horrible proportions. The government widely used the country's industrial potential for the needs of war. In all these Indian bourgeoisie got opportunities to prosper. The main advantage accruing to Indian bourgeoisie during war were less competition from major imperialist powers, a large market for country made goods inside and outside the country, war contracts, relatively cheaper raw agricultural materials, lower real wages and higher prices of manufactured goods. But for the working class it was a tough time. This was because the soaring up of prices reduced the living standards of working class. While rural areas were affected by the rise of prices of manufactured goods, the towns faced higher food prices. The expansion of industrialisation saw swelling of numbers of factory workers. In 1919, the large scale industries of the country employed 13,67,000 workers. Of this 306,300 were employed in 277 cotton spinning and weaving mills; 140,800 in 1940 cotton ginning factories and 276,100 in jute factories and presses. The railway shops employed 126,100 workers.

The October socialist revolution and subsequent sweeping mass and working class struggles formed the background under which the first organisation of

the Indian working class called All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was born. In other words, the end of World War I, the success of the October revolution and the first general crisis of capitalism added new strength to the anti-imperialist struggle of India.

The working class too did not fail to occupy its own place in the anti-imperialist struggle. In this regard it is important to note that the background of political struggle during 1905-8 is the unprecedented dimension of class struggle waged by the Indian working class in the national and international set-up of the post war period against capitalist exploitation bore more significance from the point of view of workers' class-consciousness. Then the birth of the central class organisation of Indian working class at the right moment when national political awakening was at its peak and they were conscious as class.

Box 14.04: Formation of AITUC

“The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the first national federation of trade unions in India was formed in 1920. It was a result of realisation by several people linked with labour that there was a need for a central organisation of labour to coordinate the work of trade unions all over India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, N.M. Joshi, B.P. Wadia, Diwan Chamanlall, Lala Lajpat Rai, Joseph Baptista and many others were trying to achieve this goal. The formation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) acted as a catalyst for it..... .

Lala Lajpat Rai became the first president of the AITUC and Joseph Baptista its vice-president. Motilal Nehru and Vithalbhai Patel were also present. The AITUC received a lot of support from the Indian National Congress. There were about 107 unions which were affiliated or sympathetic to the AITUC. Out of these 64 unions had 140,854 members. One notable absence was the Gandhian trade union of Ahmedabad.’ The Textile Labour Union. It was a promising beginning and the AITUC continued to grow until it split in 1929. (Upadhyaya, S.B. 2004. ‘Evolution of Trade Unions in India’, IGNOU BLC-102, Organising the Unorganised. 1)

Recession in Indian industry and economy began already in the year 1922 and continued intensifying. In 1929 the impact of the world economic recession and general crisis of world capitalism veritably shook the Indian economy. Though the World War I provided a number of industries with some temporary advantages or opportunities to expand and saw limited growth of some industries, in a real sense India's industrialisation was absolutely of a sprawling character and without any basic consolidation. The mill owners attempted to reduce wages of the workers. It is the particular misfortune of the Indian working class that they ultimately had to fall victim to the intense rivalry between imperialists and native capitalists. The workers did not lie low before that onslaught, but resisted. So, in order to safeguard its position, the working class of India had to proceed through a path of bitter struggle. The economic offensive reduced the standard of living of the workers. The investigation conducted by the Bombay Labour Office into the working class budget of 1921-23 revealed that the quantity of daily food consumed by the Bombay workers was less than what was available to the prison inmates. An enquiry conducted by the Madras labour department also revealed a similarly shameful state of affairs.

The years 1926-29 constitute an eventful phase of the working class struggle. During this phase the Indian communist movement stood on a firm foundation poised for advance. Communist influence on the working class movement was felt to be very strong. Large scale strikes were conducted during these years. Although the government tried to dub these strikes as 'communist conspiracies', these struggles, led by the communists in many cases were in fact, a sharp manifestation of the simmering discontent of a working class afflicted with crushing problems. Sharpening of struggles, side by side, acted to further widen the outlook of the working class and this was borne out by the very nature of its activities at both national and international levels. The government in response tried to root out the militant section of the working class movement by unleashing draconian measures. With a view to keeping the speeding working-class movement under safe control, they on one hand introduced the 'Trade Union Act. 1926' and on the other passed 'The Trade Disputes Act' and 'Public Safety Act' for tightening up their suppressive designs. The government even tried to incite the public opinion against them.

The world economic crisis of 1931-36 was the most profound and destructive of all economic crises capitalism has ever known. It dealt a shattering blow to the economy, the political foundation and ideology of bourgeoisie and in total effect it further aggravated the general crisis of capitalism. In India the repercussion of this crisis was more fatal. India's economy, where 80 percent of the people were dependent on agriculture came to a breaking point due to a fall in agricultural prices. The plight of the peasantry was beyond all imagination, their purchasing power came down to an all time low. In all industries there was mass retrenchment and wages were slashed. In other words, workers of all categories were hit. It is during these times that building up stiff resistance against the world economic crisis and its effect upon the working class were drastic. In spite of organisational disunity prevailing at that time, the working class waged economic struggle. However, due to the large-scale involvement of the working class also in the anti-imperialist movement of the period, the political dimension of the struggle got precedence over the economic struggle.

World war II broke out on 3rd September 1939, the Viceroy of India proclaimed India to be belligerent. This had a devastating effect on the Indian economy and working class in particular. The colonial government reoriented the economy, whereby the industrial units introduced double to triple shifts of work and leave facilities were curtailed. This was done to cater to the war needs of England. As far as workers were concerned, their economic conditions were miserable in the pre-war period, and the new war made the situation much worse. This was because of the steady fall in the wage rates across the industry. Though there was a reversal in the trends of wage rate from 1936 onwards, the abnormal rise in prices had not only offset the rise in wages, the wages of the workers in real terms had gone down. In such a situation the working class of India had to wage a struggle for protecting the existing standard of living. The working class embarked on a series of strikes in Bombay, Kanpur, Calcutta, Bangalore, Jamshedpur, Dhanbad, Jharia, Nagpur, Madras, Digboi of Assam or in a word throughout the entire country. Moreover, the greatest working class action in India was the anti-war strike which was organised in Bombay on 2nd October 1939 and was joined by 90,000 workers. This event along with other struggles indicates that during this period the outlook of the Indian working class did not remain confined solely to the economic demands. The working class rather fully kept pace with the

national and international political developments and played a key role in the political struggles. In such an event the imperialist government directed severe attacks to forestall the struggle of the working class.

The defeat of fascism and end of the World War II saw the emergence of the Indian working class as a highly organised, class conscious and uncompromising force against the colonialist. The upsurge of world democratic national liberation forces that followed had its impact in India too. An unprecedented and irresistible struggle for national liberation and democratic advance engulfed the country. Side-by-side the working class had to engage in sharp economic struggles. The reason was that after the war there was large-scale retrenchment of the wartime recruits and reduction of wages. Against all this, the working class resolutely started the struggle. The phenomenal rise in the number of strike actions (1629) in the year 1946 was an indication of the stiff resistance. All India Trade Union Congress raised the demand of stopping retrenchment, minimum wage, eight hours work, health insurance scheme, old age pension, unemployment allowance and several other social security measures. To suppress these, the government took recourse to extreme measures such as police firing and several other repressive measures. In this many workers had to lay down their lives while upholding their cause.

As soon as India became independent, the political climate of the country changed. This was particularly so for the working class. That is, till Independence political and economic struggle of the working class was directed against the colonial masters. Moreover, it was a broad political front against imperialism where everybody from the national bourgeoisie to the working class rallied with one common objective. But with Independence began a new political dynamics, where power was in the hands of capitalists and landlords. Their economic interests were directly counter to those of the working class. With this, the objective of the struggle of the working class also saw a change i.e. to end the rule of the capitalist and establish socialism in the real sense of the term. This was thought to be the precondition for growing class-consciousness, which the majority of the working class of India had not yet realised.

Though the achievement of Independence, roused immense hopes and aspirations among all sections of the society, it was accompanied by a huge rise in prices and continuous fall in the real wages of the workers. Moreover, the ruling classes had embarked upon a path of building capitalism in the newly independent country. This brought in its wake immense hardships and suffering to the toiling masses which generated powerful resistance of the working classes all over the country.

Nature and Structure of the Working Class Today

Given such an eventful history and evolution of the working class in India, it is worthwhile to examine the nature and structure of the working class in the present circumstances. As mentioned above, due to the existence of multi-structural economy and effects of primordial affiliations, a variety of forms of the working class exists in India. On top of all the differences, the differences in wage is also the basis of divisions among the working class. On the basis of wage, there are four types of workers. First, those workers who are permanent employees of the large factory sector and get family wage. (By 'family wage' it is meant that the wage of the worker should be sufficient to maintain not only the individual but also the worker's family.

For further details see Nathan, Dev, 1987'). They are mostly employed in the public sector enterprises and modern sectors of petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and engineering. Second, there is a large and preponderant section of the working class that does not get a family wage. This includes workers in the older industries like cotton and jute textiles, sugar and paper. Even the permanent workers in the tea plantation come in the same category because the owners refuse to accept the norm of family wage for an individual worker. Third, there is a section of the working class at the bottom of the wage scale – the mass of contract and sometimes casual labourers in industry, including construction, brick making and other casual workers. Fourth, below all these lie a reserve army of labour, who work in petty commodities production in petty trading, ranging from hawking to rag-picking. They are generally engaged in the informal sector and carry on for the want of sufficient survival wage. The existence of a majority of workers, who are not paid family wage means that either the worker gets some form of supplement from other non-capitalist sectors or the worker and his/her family cut down their consumption below the minimum standard. This also means that there is more than one wage earner per household. As Das Gupta (1986) mentions both men and women work in the plantation or Bidi manufacturing. At the same time they also supplement these earnings with various kinds of agricultural activities including not only cultivation as such but also poultry and milk production. Even in the plantation workers are given plots of land with which to carry on agricultural production. It is the supplementary agricultural activities that enable wages in these sectors to be kept low. In this sense, supplementary activities by the workers under pre-capitalist relations of production is a tribute to the capitalist sector.

Not only is there wage differential among the working class, there is also variation in the terms of working conditions. Hence, better paid labour has also much greater job security. However the workers on the lower end of the wage scale have not only job security but also considerable extra-economic coercion and personal bondage which leads to lack of civil rights. Similarly, working conditions for the low paid workers are uniformly worse than for high paid workers. So, in the same plant or site there is a clear difference in the safety measures for the two groups of workers. The situation worsens further with regard to women workers. For example, women are not allowed to work in the steel plants for safety reasons, but are not prohibited to be employed on the same site as contract labour.

Reflection and Action 14.02

Visit a local factory or cottage industry in your city/town or village. Find out about the type of workers in that factory.

Ask two workers at least, who belong to the organised sector, about their social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. Do they have links with their villages? Are they members of a Trade Union? If so, what are the benefits of belonging to the Trade Union?

Now select at least two workers from the same factory who are from the unorganised sector. Ask the same questions to them which you asked the organised sector workers.

Based on these interviews, write a report of two pages on 'The Different Positions of Organised and Unorganised sector workers in an Indian Factory.' Compare your report with those of your peers at your Study Centre.

With such major divisions amongst the working classes of India on the basis of wage, one would expect that there would be large scale mobility among the workers. So a worker would start as casual or contract labour in a firm and then would move to permanent employment either in the same or other firms. A study by Deshpande (1979) of Bombay labour found the reverse to be true. That is, around 87 per cent of the regular employees, who had changed their jobs had started as regular employees and only 13 per cent had started as casual labour. In this regard Harriss (1982), who conducted a study in Coimbatore, reported that ‘ individuals do not move easily between sectors of the labour market. Among the 826 households surveyed there were only less than 20 cases of movement from unorganised into organised sector. Many in the unorganised sector had the requisite skills, experience and education for factory jobs. But they lack the right connections or to put it in another way, they do not belong to the right social network’. This means that mobility to a large extent is dependent upon the way recruitments are done. The above-mentioned study of Bombay labour, though dealing with private sector, found that recruitments are done mainly through friends and relatives. A study in Ahmedabad by Subramaniam and Papola (1973) found that 91 per cent of the jobs were secured through introduction by other workers. This in a way then denies the disadvantaged groups, access to the high wage employment. In public sector, though a substantial portion of the vacancies are filled through employment exchange, it does not in any way mean that the casual, contract or other disadvantaged groups have equal access.

14.6 Social Background of Indian Working Class

Indian working class, as mentioned earlier, came from diverse social backgrounds in which primordial identities such as caste, ethnicity, religion and language played very important roles. In recent years, the significance of these elements has been reduced but they do persist nonetheless. In this regard, the Ahmedabad study (1973), points out that where jobs are secured through introduction by other workers, the latter was a blood relation in 35 per cent of the cases, belonged to the same caste in another 44 percent and belonged to the same native place in another 12 per cent. Friends helped in 7 per cent of the cases. Several other studies have pointed out the role of kinship ties in getting employment (Gore 1970). Kinship ties not only play a significant role in securing employment, but also in the placement in the wage scale. Five studies of Pune, Kota, Bombay, Ahmedabad and Bangalore covering large number of industries found that 61 per cent of workers were upper caste Hindus (Sharma 1970). The dominant position of the workers from upper caste was also brought out in a study of Kerala. This study points out that in higher income jobs upper castes dominate whereas Dalits/advasis have preponderance in low wage jobs. The middle castes are concentrated in middle to bottom ranges. Even in public sector, the representation of backward castes, schedule castes and tribes is not up to their proportion in the population. Moreover, it seems that caste based division of labour is followed in the class III and IV jobs in government and public sector enterprises. So the jobs of sweepers are reserved for dalits and advasis. In coal mines, hard physical labour of loading and pushing the coaltubs is done by dalits and advasis. In steel plants the production work in the intense heat of coke oven and blast furnace is mainly done by advasis and dalits. This is because, as Deshpande (1979) points out, of ‘pre labour market characteristic’ such as education and land holding. So those who possessed more land and education ended up in a higher wage sector. But then if upper and lower

caste people own comparable levels of landholding and education, the upper caste worker will get into a higher segment of the wage than the lower caste worker. This is because of the continuing importance of caste ties in recruitment. Caste also serves the function of ensuring the supply of cheap labour for different jobs with the fact of not paying more than what is necessary. In other words, the depressed conditions of adivasis and dalits helps in ensuring a supply of labour, who can be made to work at the mere subsistence level (Nathan 1987). Hence, caste on one hand plays a role in keeping the lower sections of the society in the lower strata of the working class, on the other hand, the upper caste get a privilege in the labour market. Further, caste is not only a matter of marriage and to an extent residence, but more so a continuing pool of social relation for the supply of various kinds of labour for the capitalist mode of production (ibid.).

14.7 Conclusion

The working class, which is the product of capitalist relations of production, came into being with the industrial revolution and subsequent industrialisation in England in particular and Europe in general. In this relation of production, unlike other epochs, they did not own anything except the labour, which they sold for survival. At the other spectrum, there were capitalists who not only owned all the means of production but also appropriated all the surplus generated out of these relations of production.

The working class at the conceptual level seems to be fairly simple, but if one tries to define it, the problem magnifies. The reason is that this is not a homogeneous entity. Rather it is a complex, contradictory and constantly changing entity. Another reason is that the concept of 'class-consciousness', is very slippery with regard to the working class. The consequence of this is that it is often proclaimed that either the working class is shrinking in size or everybody except a few at the top are working class. However the fact is that working class is a distinct entity, with characteristics of its own. In India, the situation is much more complex because of several reasons like, (a) the forced intrusion of British capital in India; (b) simultaneous existence of multiple relations of production; and (c) never ending identification of working mass with primordial features such as caste, religion and other ethnic divisions of the society.

The coming into being and consolidation of the working class in the world as well as in India, has been affected by local and international events of both economic and political nature. So for carrying out further studies on the working class, these peculiarities have to be taken into account.

14.8 Further Reading

Holmstrom, M. 1991: 'Who Are the 'Working Class'?' in Dipanker Gupta edited *Social Stratification*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi

Sen, Sukomal 1997 : *Working Class of India-History of Emergence & Movement 1830-1996*. K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta

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Unit 15

The Middle Class

Contents

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Concept of Class
- 15.3 Concept of the 'Middle Class'
- 15.4 Evolution of the Middle Class in India
- 15.5 Modernity and the Middle Class in Contemporary India
- 15.6 Values Related to Family, Marriage and Women's Status amongst the Middle Class
- 15.7 Conclusion
- 15.8 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- » explain the concept of class;
- » discuss the concept of 'middle class';
- » outline the evolution of middle class in India;
- » describe the link between modernity and the middle class in contemporary India; and
- » discuss the values related to family, marriage and status of women amongst the middle class.

15.1 Introduction

Analysis of the middle class in contemporary capitalist society has been lacking in systematic discussion. This is also the case in a society such as India. There has been an ongoing debate on what constitutes the middle class in India. However, a comprehensive understanding of the middle class in India is still far from complete. In this Unit, we endeavour to understand the concept of 'middle class' in India in contemporary times. We have divided this Unit into four sections. In the first section, we discuss the concept of class from various perspectives following which, in the second section, we focus on the definition of middle class and its evolution in India. The third section will be devoted to understanding the middle class in contemporary India. The fourth section explains the values related to family, marriage and kinship amongst the middle class; and in the final section, we bring the discussion to a conclusion.

15.2 Concept of Class

Before entering into any theoretical discussion on what constitutes the middle class and whether India has a middle class, it becomes pertinent to understand 'class' as a concept. Right from the time of classical thinkers, myriad viewpoints on 'class' have been put forth. Karl Marx defined social class as an aggregate of persons who perform the same function in the organisation of production. In Marx's theory, social classes in different historical periods are given different names such as freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, oppressor

and oppressed. Classes are distinguished from each other by the difference in their respective positions in the economy (Bendix & Lipset, 1967: 7). Since social class is constituted by the function which its members perform in the process of production, the question arises why the organisation of production is the basic determinant of social class. Fundamental to this theory was Marx's belief that work is man's basic form of self-realisation. Stating the four aspects of production, Marx propounded that these explain why man's efforts to provide for his subsistence underlie all change in history. Following from this, Marx asserted that the fundamental determinant of class is the way in which the individual cooperates with others in the satisfaction of his or her basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Other indices such as income, consumption patterns, educational attainment or occupation are so many clues to the distribution of material goods and of prestige symbols (ibid:8). Interpreting Karl Marx's viewpoint, Lipset and Bendix explain that the income or occupation of an individual, according to Marx, is not an indication of his class position i.e of his position in the production process. Marx believed that a man's position in the production process provided the crucial life experience, which would eventually determine the beliefs and actions of that individual.

As Marx saw it, the organisation of production provides the necessary but not a sufficient basis for the existence of social classes. Taking the examples of bourgeoisie and proletariat, Marx illustrated the manner in which he envisaged the emergence of a social class. Put simply, Marx viewed social class as a condition of group life, which was constantly generated by the organisation of production. He went on to elaborate that the existence of common conditions and the realisation of common interests are only the necessary, not the sufficient bases for the development of a social class. Only when the members of a 'potential' class enter into an association for the organised pursuit of their common aims, does a class in Marx's sense exist. Marx did not simply identify a social class with the fact that a large group of people occupied the same objective position in the economic structure of a society. Instead he laid stress on the importance of subjective awareness as a precondition of organising the class successfully for the economic and the political struggle. Marx felt that the pressures engendered by capitalism would determine its development in the future. Subjective awareness, in his view, was an indispensable element in the development of the social class and this would arise with growing contradictions inherent in capitalism.

Writing on Marx, Erik Olin Wright points out that although the former did not systematically answer the question 'What constitutes a class?', yet most of his work revolves around two problems: the elaboration of abstract structural maps of class relations and the analysis of concrete conjunctural maps of classes as actors (Wright, 1985: 6). From the abstract structural account of classes comes the characteristically polarized map of class relations that runs through most of Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*. In contrast to this, the conjunctural political analyses are characterised by a complex picture of classes, fractions, factions, social categories, strata and other actors on the political stage. Elaborating on this further, Wright argues that the distinction between class structure and class formation is a basic, if often implicit, distinction in class analysis. Class structure refers to the structure of social relations into which individuals enter which determine their class interests (ibid:9). Class formation on the other hand, refers to the formation of organised collectivities within that

class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that class structure. Put simply, if class structure is defined by social relations between classes, class formation is defined by social relations within classes, social relations which forge collectivities engaged in struggle.

Taking the cue from Marx, Max Weber made classifications such as 'classes', 'status groups' and 'parties' based on distribution of power within a community. He defined 'class' as when 1) a number of people have in common a specific casual component of their life chances in so far as 2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income and 3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. In Weber's theory, class situation is ultimately the 'market situation' (Weber, 1946). He goes on to elaborate that the factor that creates class is unambiguously an economic interest and only those interests involved in the existence of the market.

Joseph Schumpeter states that there are basically four problems that beset the class theory in Sociology. In doing so he takes into account the scientific rather than the philosophical, and the sociological rather than the immediate economic. The four problems are: 1) There is the problem of the nature of class and as part of this problem, the function of class in the vital processes of the social whole. 2) Problem of social cohesion – the factors that constitute every social class. 3) The problem of class formation – the question of why the social whole has never been homogeneous revealing organic stratification. 4) This problem is wholly distinct from the series of problems that are concerned with the concrete causes and conditions of an individual determined, historically given class structure.

Class, as defined by Schumpeter, is more than an aggregation of class members. A class is aware of its identity as a whole, sublimates itself as such, has its own peculiar life and characteristic "spirit". However, a noted phenomenon is that class members behave towards one another in a fashion characteristically different from their conduct towards members of other classes. They are in closer association with one another; they understand one another better; they work more readily in concert; they close ranks and erect barriers against the outside; they look into the same segment of the world with the same eyes, from the same viewpoint, in the same direction. Social intercourse within class barriers is promoted by the similarity of manners and habits of life, or things that are evaluated in a positive or negative sense, that arouse interest. Classes, once they have come into being, harden in their mould and perpetuate themselves, even when the social conditions that created them have disappeared.

Pointing to the history of the term 'social class', Stanislaw Ossowski argued that from the second half of the 18th century onwards, class has been an interesting subject for sociologists. He considers two specifying versions of the concept of 'class'.

- a) Social class is seen as a group distinguished in respect of relations of property. This is basically the economic version of social class.
- b) The class system is contrasted with group systems in the social structure in which an individual's membership of the group is institutionally determined and in which privileges or discriminations result from the individual's ascription to a certain group. This is the result not of birth

or an official document such as title of nobility but is the consequence of social status otherwise achieved.

In various social systems one can observe two or more coexisting types of the relation of class dependence. Three assumptions which appear to be common to all conceptions of a 'class society' can be stated in the following manner:

- 1) The classes constitute a system of the most comprehensive groups in the social structure.
- 2) The class division concerns social statuses connected with a system of privileges and discriminations not determined by biological criteria.
- 3) The membership of individuals in a social class is relatively permanent.

Out of myriad ways of understanding class, one can elicit three or four such characteristics. They are by no means of equal importance in the history of social thought.

- 1) The vertical order of social classes: the existence of superior and inferior categories of social statuses which are superior or inferior in respect of some system of privileges and discriminations. Accepting such a class structure would mean class stratification.
- 2) Distinctness of permanent class interests.
- 3) Class consciousness – involves not only class identification but also a consciousness of the place of one's class in the class hierarchy, a realisation of class distinctness, class interests and possibly of class solidarity as well.
- 4) Social isolation – the absence of closer social contacts: social distance. In the US, according to this definition, a social class is the largest group of people whose members have intimate social access to one another. A society is a class society in respect of this characteristic if there exist within it distinct barriers to social intercourse and if class boundaries can be drawn by means of an analysis of interpersonal relations. Not only is social isolation involved but also the effects of this isolation and the effects of differences in the degree of access to the means of consumption.

These class criteria are not independent of each other. Given the fact that these characteristics are interdependent, Ossowski concludes that there could be various definitions of class. The pertinent question at this juncture is how do we define middle class in India in general and in contemporary times in particular.

15.3 Concept of the 'Middle Class'

The problems which the middle class pose for the social scientist are typically metropolitan in character and nationwide in scope. C. Wright Mills states that a city's population may be stratified in the following manner: a) objectively in terms of such bases as property or occupation or the amount of income received from either or both sources. Information about these bases may be confined to the present or may include b) extractions, intermarriages and job histories of members of given strata. Subjectively, strata may be constructed according to who does the rating: c) each individual may be asked to assign himself a position, d) the interviewer may intuitively rate each individual or e) each individual may be asked to stratify the population and then to give his image of the people on each level.

Citing Dahrendorf (1959: 51-57), one finds that four different positions can be identified regarding the class situation of the new middle class. In the first position it is held that since most middle class occupations have been structurally differentiated from what were previously ruling class occupations, so the new middle class is an extension of the existent capitalist ruling class (Bendix, 1963). In the second position it is held that the middle class is really much closer to the working class because both groups do not own the means of production. Any identification with the ruling class is merely false consciousness that will disappear once the middle class comes to realise their class interests to be coincidental with the working class (Klingender, 1935 & Wright Mills C., 1956). A third position is that there is no such thing as the middle class but instead there are two different groupings with opposed interests, bureaucrats with ruling class authority and white collar workers with a proletarian class situation (Dahrendorf, 1959). Finally there is a position where it is maintained that the middle class is in a structurally ambivalent situation (Lockwood, 1958).

Elaborating on the growth of the middle class, John Urry argues that Marx's account of the rise of the middle class was in terms of a growing surplus that demanded a class or classes to consume more than they produced and an increasingly complicated industrial structure which needed non productive functionaries to service it. In 'Theories of Surplus Value', Marx goes on to argue that as capitalism develops there is an expansion of the middle class. Taking the cue from Marx, Urry propounded that a historical analysis of the growth of the middle class has illustrated that with the market structure there has been the development of a highly significant middle class which does not own the means of production but is a powerful favoured status situation in the structure of workplace relationships (Urry, 1996: 255).

Like Marx and Weber, most modern sociologists use economic factors as the basic criteria for differentiating social classes. Anthony Giddens identifies three major classes in advanced capitalist society. They are upper class based on the 'ownership of property in the means of production', a middle class based on the 'possession of educational and technical qualifications' and a lower or working class based on the 'possession of manual labour power'. These classes, in Giddens's opinion, are distinguished by their differing relationships to the forces of production and by their particular strategies for obtaining economic reward in a capitalist economy. Another viewpoint regarding class is the functional perspective whereby functional requirements of society determines differential occupational rewards. An alternative explanation is that power is a determinant of occupational rewards.

This is a very basic understanding of the concept of the middle class drawing our attention to 'middle class in India'. First and foremost, it becomes significant to delve into the evolution of the middle class in India.

Reflection and Action 15.01

Read carefully the section on 'middle class' in India. Observe your own family and your immediate neighbours. Write a report of one page on "Me and My Class" where you state, to which class you think you belong and why? Discuss your report with other students at your Study Centre and your Academic Counsellor.

15.4 Evolution of the Middle Class in India

B.B. Misra (1961) in his seminal work on the middle classes in India had concluded that institutions conducive to capitalist growth were not lacking in India prior to the British rule. Pre-British India did witness an Indian artisan industry as well as occupational specialisation and additionally a separate class of merchants. The guild power remained purely money power unsupported by any authority of a political or military nature. The British rule resulted in the emergence of a class of intermediaries serving as a link between people and the new rulers. In Misra's viewpoint, there was a fundamental revolution in social relations and class structure in India. The emergent class of intermediaries was the middle class that continued to grow in strength and prosperity with the progress of foreign rule. Significantly, the establishment of trading relations followed by the rule of the British East India Company set the stage in the creation of this class. Furthermore, as part of their educational policy, the British attempted to create a class comparable to their own to assist the former in the administration of the country (Misra, 1961:10). The aim of the British was to create a class of imitators and not originators of new values and methods (Ahmad & Reifeld, 2001:8).

As Pavan K. Verma points out in his work on the middle class, from the circumstances of their origin and growth, the members of the educated class such as government servants, lawyers, college teachers and doctors constituted the bulk of the Indian middle class. This middle class, in Verma's opinion, was largely dominated by the traditional higher castes (Verma, 1998: 27). Ahmad and Reifeld argue that in its formation and the role played in history, the Indian middle class bore close resemblance, at least in some parts, to its European counterparts (Ahmad & Reifeld, 2001). Like their counterparts in Europe earlier, some of the entrants to commercial activity either as agents or independently in the 17th and the first half of the 18th century amassed great wealth and acquired social status far beyond what they could aspire to have in the structure of economic relations in the traditional society. But alongside, differences existed, too. While the European middle class was independent, the Indian middle class was under foreign rule. Initially, the middle class helped in the establishment of British power and promotion of European commerce and enterprise in India. It was only after the 'Mutiny' that it began to assume the political role of competitor for power with the British. With the passage of time, the competitor role adopted by an important section of the middle class came to dominate over that of a collaborator and this continued till the very end of the Raj. Ahmad and Reifeld conclude that from the beginning of the 20th century, the Indian middle class had come to pose a serious challenge to the continuance of the British power. It was instrumental in arousing national consciousness and giving a sense of unity as a nation to the people (Ahmad and Reifeld, 2001:10).

Sanjay Joshi, in his study of the making of the middle class in colonial India, attempted to explain why traditional sociological indicators of income and occupation cannot take us very far in understanding the category of middle class. Though the economic background of the middle class was important, the power and constitution of the middle class in India was based not on the economic power it wielded, which was minimal, but on the ability of its members to be cultural entrepreneurs. Being middle class was primarily a project of 'self fashioning' (Joshi, 2001: 4). Joshi articulated that the definition and power of the middle class, from its propagation of modern ways of life,

heterogeneity was an attribute of the middle class. The rapid expansion of a new middle class in India during the last decade of the 20th century and its increasing influence in many parts of the public sphere constitute one of the most important changes in India's contemporary history.

Box 15.01: Rural and Urban Middle Class

According to Yogendra Singh (1991), if we compare the rural middle classes with the urban, we find one major similarity. The rural middle classes have ideological affinity at one level with the urban middle classes as both of them share conservative and narrow utilitarian ethos. But the rural middle classes also harbour, on another level, intense antagonism and conflict with the urban middle classes, entrepreneurs and professional groups.

The antagonism and conflict has arisen due to certain historical reasons. The process of development in agriculture has after a period of time slowed down due to structural technological stagnation. He believes that even the so called rich peasants have over the past few years confronted the prospect of downward mobility in terms of social and economic status due to unfavourable price policy, stagnation in agriculture productivity, fragmentation of landholding due to rise in population and non-availability of other avenues of employment for their youth. He says that this post-Green Revolution under-development in agriculture further reinforces the alienation of middle classes in rural areas from the urban and industrial middle classes. This fact has been a setback to their level of aspiration which had seen its peak during the Green Revolution phase.

Andre Beteille writes that the middle class is not only very large but also highly differentiated internally to such an extent that it may be more appropriate to speak of the middle classes than of the middle class in India, stresses upon the heterogeneous nature of its social composition (Beteille, 2001: 73). The recent shifts in the economic policy in favour of privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation have generated a wide interest in the middle class, its size, composition and its social values. Andre Beteille views middle class in India as part of a relatively new social formation based on religion, caste and kinship. In Beteille's opinion, middle class values in India are difficult to characterise because they are still in the process of formation and have still not acquired a stable form (Beteille, 2001:74). As such, they are marked by deep and pervasive antinomies meaning contradictions, oppositions and tensions inherent in a set of norms and values.

Public discussion of the middle class in the last 10 years has been driven largely by media. There is hardly anything substantial in the structure of the middle class in the sociological literature. The discussion of the middle class values is constrained by the absence of reliable and systematic data on the size and composition of the class. Estimates of its size vary from under 100 million to over 250 million persons. There is no single criterion for defining the middle class (Beteille, 2001: 76). Occupational functions and employment status are the two most significant criteria although education and income are also widely used. The new middle class, according to Beteille is not only defined by occupation but also by education. In India, the origins of the middle class derive not so much from an industrial revolution or a democratic revolution as from colonial rule. In the last 50 years, the middle class has grown steadily.

Commenting on the growing middle class, Gurcharan Das (Das, 2000) stated that although the middle class is composed of many occupations, commerce has always been at the center- as the businessman mediated between the landed upper classes and the labouring lower classes. The 20th century witnessed an entrepreneurial surge in the last decade after 1991 and the expansion of the middle class in the last two decades after 1980. After growing at a rate of 3.5% a year from 1950 to 1980, India's economic growth rate increased to 5.6% in the decade of the 80s. It climbed further to 6.3% in the decade of 1990s. In these 2 decades the middle class more than tripled. Between 1998- 2000, \$2.5 billion in venture capital funds have come to India (McKinsey's studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between the availability of venture funds and the proliferation of business start ups). Writing about this middle class, Das argued that as a result of changing trends, a new kind of entrepreneur has emerged in India (Das, 2000:195). As Gurcharan Das notes, although the reforms after 1991 have been slow, hesitant and incomplete, yet they have set in motion a process of profound change in Indian society. It is Joseph Schumpeter who coined the term 'entrepreneur'. Contrary to earlier times, the new millionaires today are looked up to with pride and even reverence. For they are a new meritocracy – highly educated entrepreneur professionals who are creating value by innovating in the global knowledge economy.

The emergence of a sizeable middle class in the last decades is widely regarded with hope by the modernisers and fear by the traditionalists as the single most important development in the ongoing transformation of Indian society (Kakar). According to a survey by NCAER the middle class grew from 8% of the population in 1986 to 18% in 2000 which is about 185 million. It appears that for many modern sociologists of India, the emergent middle class is a harbinger of modernity but the question of great relevance is how does one define modernity. Can one define the middle class as modern, based on material progress or is the middle class ethos to be analysed in a more deep rooted manner with regard to the basis of formation of social relations among people who constitute the middle class. In the subsequent section, the focus will be on understanding the rising middle class in contemporary India and whether we can define it as modern, traditional or as Beteille (Beteille, 2001) labels it, as 'transitional'.

15.5 Modernity and the Middle Class in Contemporary India

We live in modern times – times that are witnessing rapid changes in the technological, economic, political and social realms. Microwaves, DVDs, palmtop computers, cloning, genetic manipulation and so on all appear to corroborate how much more technologically advanced contemporary society is in comparison to the society of the past. Today's world appears to be peculiarly dynamic, a world which is in the process of constant change and transformation. According to Marshall Berman, to live in a modern world is to live in 'a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish' (Berman 1988:15). Essentially, modernity signifies the destruction of past forms of life, values and identities combined with the production of new ones. One of the major outcomes of this has been the emergence of 'consumer culture' or 'consumerism' whereby culture is constructed through consumption, not just production. Consumer culture is bound up with central values, practices and institutions that define modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations. Primarily this

consumerist ideology involves a process of innovation, of constant turnover and novelty. Extending viewpoints of scholars such as Simmel (1972) and Campbell (1987) to present times, it can be stated that along with money making, consumption of goods has become an end in itself. Fundamentally both of these represent a break from tradition. In the 20th century we witnessed consumer culture reaching its apogee in the West. Within this contemporary consumer culture, what has developed is a 'lifestyle' connoting individuality, self-expression and stylistic self-consciousness (Featherstone 1991:86).

Most often, the terms 'consumption' and 'consumer culture' are used interchangeably, but a sociological analysis reveals a definite distinction between the two. Two important features that distinguish consumer culture from consumption are:

- a) Constant turnover of commodities with emphasis being laid on newer and changed versions of goods. One consumes not because one needs something but to be in fashion.
- b) A generalised consumption – it does not remain confined to the upper echelons of society but becomes all pervading.

In modern consumeristic societies, people are no longer locked in their respective positions. Lifestyles can be and are improved upon constantly. Moreover, it becomes a generalised phenomenon with all classes of people being subjected to a surfeit of images and signs because of advertising and being active participants in consumer culture. What is present is essentially, 'fluidization of consumption' i.e. freeing up the previously static and relatively fixed spatial and temporal dimensions of social life (Lee 1993:124-133). Also consumption is viewed as a stage in a process of communication i.e. an act of deciphering and decoding. What is required is to be able to move from the primary stratum of meaning, which one can grasp on the basis of ordinary experience to the stratum of secondary meanings that is the level of meaning of what is signified (Bourdieu 1979:2). Therefore, in a modern society there is a strong tendency for social groups to seek to classify and order their social circumstances as well as use cultural goods as means of demarcation and as communicators that establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others (Jameson 1991:XX of Introduction). The process by which taste becomes a process of differentiation leading to creation of distinctions between different categories of goods and between social groups is an ongoing one. Contemporary Western societies have been witnessing, what Mike Featherstone refers to as the 'doubly symbolic aspect of goods'. Symbolism is not only evident in the design and imagery of production and marketing processes, but the symbolic association of goods may be utilised and renegotiated to emphasise the differences in lifestyle which demarcate social relationships (Featherstone 1991:86). This leads us to conclude that a critical aspect of a modern consumer society is the presence of an open system of stratification with avenues of upward mobility being available to all.

“Rather than reflexively adopting a lifestyle through tradition or habit, new heroes of consumer culture make 'lifestyle' a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in particularity of assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experience, appearance and bodily dispositions, they design together a lifestyle.”(ibid.: 86)

goods, is able to destabilise the original notion of use or meaning of goods and attach to them new images and signs which can summon up a whole range of associated feelings and desires (Featherstone 1999:274). This, in turn, results in impulsive purchase of newer and latest versions of products. In fact, the commodity becomes the primary index of the social relations of modern capitalist societies. Modern societies experience the reflexivity process at both the institutional and personal levels that is decisive for the production and change of modern systems and modern forms of social organisation (Giddens 1991:1).

True modernity cannot be defined only in terms of material progress. In order to be able to get a comprehensive view of whether or not a social order can be called modern, we need to view it through a larger prism, that of the kind of interpersonal relationships existing among people. Modernity confronts the individuals with a diversity of choices in all spheres of life. Universalism, achievement and individualism are the important ingredients of a modern social order. This affects the most personal and intimate aspects of individuals including self-identity. As the ties of tradition are loosened and compulsiveness of repetition disappears, new opportunities are created for individuals in society. The availability of more options implies that people have to make more decisions. Choices are not restricted to consumer items alone but extend into all realms of personal lives of people. This allows individuals to negotiate about conditions of all social relations, norms and ethics that would form the basis of relations between men and women, between friends and between parents and children. Tradition no longer constitutes the basis of individuals' decisions and actions.

Following from earlier discussions whereby it has been reiterated that the pace of growth of the middle class has been accelerated by changing economic policies in the post liberalisation era in India, it becomes pertinent to analyse whether the material progress in India, more so in the case of the middle class, is witnessing commensurate changes in the values and attitudes of those belonging to the middle class to label them as 'modern'. In a research study undertaken among the urban populace of a metropolitan society such as Delhi (Chandra, 2003), one of the primary objectives was to precisely gauge the level of modernity existing among those belonging to the middle class- upper and lower. To begin with, a class has been defined in terms of income, occupation and quality of dwelling area. Those living in a metropolitan centre such as New Delhi appear to be modern in terms of dress and eating habits. But a more profound issue that needs to be thoroughly investigated is whether a modern ethos is visible in the attitudes of people at a deeper level. It is by analysis of the basis for the formation of interpersonal relationships among individuals, that one can make an attempt to categorise the middle class as 'traditional', 'modern' or maybe 'transitional'.

The affluent consumers, those belonging to the upper class and upper middle class seem to indulge in a rapid turnover of products in order to differentiate themselves from the masses as well as maintain commonalities with their own kind. For most of the super rich consumers, irrespective of age and sex, possession of the latest consumer durables as well as non- durables connotes being technologically updated and in fashion. They are positively inclined to wearing designer labels and eating out. Acts of consumption are taken as critical indicators of a modern status by them. Even in the upper middle class, possession of durables such as air conditioners, television sets, computers and the like are viewed as necessities in the contemporary age.

Throughout the research, it was discernible that this group of respondents want to emulate the affluent in their preferences but is unable to replace the goods at the same pace as the rich do because of financial constraints. Significantly, the upper middle class are also buying consumer durables of international brands in the post liberalisation era. On the whole, they appear to be as fashion conscious as the affluent. In fact, apparently the upper middle class are choosing clothes and places for eating out that enable them to categorise themselves with the elite.

Reflection and Action 15.02

Do you think you are a modern person? What do you think constitutes modernity in your opinion? Think about it and write an essay of about two pages on “Why I am a modern person?” or “Why I am not a modern person?” Discuss your essay with other students at your Study Centre.

On the other hand, the lower middle class respondents are unable to participate in consumer culture due to lack of adequate resources. Although the politics of culture of consumption has still not trickled down, yet there is a definite change in their patterns of consumption. It is quite important to take note of the fact that even those belonging to the lower middle class are changing their consumption patterns in their endeavour to be categorized as ‘modern’. This has been facilitated by a number of exchange schemes. However, while purchasing durables and non-durables emphasis is laid on the utilitarian aspects and the price of the required product. In clothes, the younger generation are choosing cheaper imitations of the original designer labels as they are affordable. The concept of ‘eating out’ is catching on. What differentiates them from the upper and upper middle classes, is that they do not eat in expensive restaurants.

Box 15.02: The Great Indian Middle Class

The Indian middle class is not just growing at a rapid pace, it has also become the segment driving consumption of “luxury” goods like cars and air-conditioners, according to a survey by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

While the middle class, which the survey defines as households with annual incomes between Rs. 2 lakh and Rs. 10 lakh at 2001-02 prices accounted for barely 5.7% of all Indian households in 2001-02, it already owned 60% of all the cars and Acs in the country and 25% of all TVs, fridges and motorcycles.

Read that with the projection that the middle class will account for 13% of India’s population by 2009-10 and you can see why the NCAER sees huge growth potential in the market for cars and mobikes. The study predicts that the market for cars will grow at 20% a year, while bikes will clock growth of 16% per annum till 2009-10.

Fridges and colour TV makers can hope to cash in on the boom too, with projected growth rates in the range of 10% to 11%. The market for radios, electric irons, bicycles and wrist watches too will grow, though by a more modest 7-9% a year.

On the flip side, black & white TVs, scooters and mopeds may be hit, with the report suggesting that demand for these goods will actually decline.

The projected consumption boom isn't just restricted to urban India. On the contrary, the survey suggests that the urban market for some relatively low-end products will be saturated by the end of the decade, while rural demand picks up. As a result, 80% of radios, 65% of colour TVs, 48% of mobikes, 40% of scooters and 33% of fridges will be owned by the rural populace by 2009-10. Indeed, the projection is that with rural incomes rising, even the demand for cars will grow in the villages to the point where the country-side will account for 11% of all cars by the end of the decade. The survey - The Great Indian Middle Class-categorises the population into four income groups. The "deprived" are those with household incomes below Rs. 90,000 a year and they constituted just under 72% of all households in 2001-02. By 2009-10, that share will be down to 51.6%, says the survey.

The next step up the income ladder consists of the "aspirers" – those with annual household incomes between Rs. 90,000 and Rs. 2 lakh. This category constituted a little under 22% of all households in 2001-02, but is likely to rise to 34% by the end of the decade.

The "middle class" households numbered 10.7 million in 2001-2; by 2009-10, they're expected to rise to 28.4 million. "The rich too are growing in numbers," points out Rakesh Shukla, senior fellow and head of the survey team, NCAER. From 0.8 million in 2001-02, they're expected to grow to 3.8 million by the end of the decade.

"While the number of crorepati families was 5,000 in 1995-96, they increased to 20,000 in 2001-02. By the end of the decade, there'll be 1.4 lakh such households," says Shukla. Also, most of the deprived (85%) and the aspirers (60%) will be concentrated in rural areas by the end of the decade, while three-fourths of the rich and two-thirds of the middle class will be found in cities.

The report is based on extensive surveys covering three lakh households across 858 villages and 660 towns and cities all over India. It covered a list of 20 durables, seven consumables and a host of services including mediclaim, life insurance and credit cards. (TOI, N. Delhi, June 24, 2005)

Thus, on the whole, it can be concluded that with changing economic policies in India, the middle class is witnessing a metamorphosis in their consumption patterns but consumer culture is still in its nascent stage in urban India. Rather than becoming an all-pervasive phenomenon, consumption is still in terms of differences. Therefore consumerism has yet to evolve. It is quite evident that material progress is taking place, albeit at a slow pace but most importantly, it is imperative to delve into the kind of social relations those belonging to the middle class are entering into, to understand whether they are modern in the strict sense of the word.

With regards to formation of interpersonal relations, it is found that the middle class as Andre Beteille writes, is still in the process of formation and have still not acquired a stable form (Beteille, 2001:74). As such they are marked by deep and pervasive antinomies meaning contradictions, oppositions and tensions inherent in a set of norms and values.

15.6 Values Related To Family, Marriage and Women's Status Amongst the Middle Class

Even in the 21st century, marriage is considered an important traditional social institution that all are supposed to enter into. Choices available with individuals, specifically women, are very few as marriage and motherhood are taken to be the ultimate goals. A woman's identity is seen to be largely dependent on her marital status.

Marriage is still seen as a way of life through which an individual entered adulthood in both upper and upper middle classes of urban India, who outwardly appear to be modern. Although marriage is considered essential for both men and women, yet in the case of women, adherence to the social norms becomes more rigid. In the context of remaining single and unmarried, women seem to have a limited choice. In other words, men have more options as they could choose to remain single but women, by and large, do not enjoy such freedom.

Particularistic criteria continue to provide the normative basis for the formation of intimate relations among people across all classes. Although arranged marriages, whereby parents choose the prospective mates for their children are the preferred form of marriage, in the upper and upper middle classes, certain changes are observable. Semi-arranged marriages, in which individuals choose their own life partners but marry only with the consent of their parents, are also taking place. In such marriages, inter-caste and inter-religious marital alliances are being tolerated, albeit conditionally. Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian marriages are still taboo. The main reason cited for disapproval of such alliances is the higher probability of mal-adjustment between spouses because of religious differences leading to breakdown of ties. Other than these exceptional cases, a majority continue to subscribe to the traditional value system with emphasis being laid on marriages taking place within the same caste and religion. However, certain changes have occurred from previous generations as the prospective mates are allowed to meet once or twice before the finalisation of the marital unions. In the lower middle and lower classes, there is strict adherence to social norms. Wedding ceremonies are performed in a traditional way. Choices available with individuals are very few. In case of the lower middle class, such values and norms are comparatively more deep-rooted. Certain ambiguities are quite evident in the attitudes of those belonging to the middle class as they seem to be more open to change while responding to the same queries in questionnaires but adopt a more traditional viewpoint while narrating their life histories without being too conscious during in-depth interviews. Such contradictions are inherent in the set of social norms and values upheld by them.

Furthermore, the stereotypical roles of man being the 'breadwinner' and woman the 'nurturer' are perpetuated. In the upper and upper middle classes, certain changes are observable. There is 'superficial emancipation' as women are choosing clothes that are in tune with the latest in the world of fashion. Nonetheless, they do not have complete freedom to decide on matters related to their occupations and marriage. Since marriage and motherhood are considered to be the most important goals, all decisions have to be in consonance with these. Women, in the upper class, are not encouraged to be gainfully employed as that is taken to reflect a poor status of the families that they belong to. Vocations with flexible timings are subscribed to making

it convenient for them to complete their primary tasks of home management and therefore not facing any form of role conflict.

Although women in the upper and upper middle classes in the contemporary age appear to be more autonomous compared to those belonging to the previous generations, they are still considered to be appendages to men. Only in the realm of the size of the family, the former seem to have as much say as the latter. In the upper middle class, parents lay emphasis on their daughters excelling in their studies just as they would wish their sons to. However, emphasis is not laid on higher education as that is taken to be a hindrance in getting good matrimonial matches. A harmonious marital relationship is seen to be dependent on women occupying a sub-ordinate status to men.

In the lower middle class, also, women appear to have limited choices in the sphere of education. Education is considered important in order to enable them to be better wives and mothers. Significantly, most women are gainfully employed but they are compelled to join the work force to meet the economic needs of the family. Women are essentially expected to remain within the domains of their households and cater to the needs of their families. This is viewed as a natural phenomenon. Women do not have absolute freedom to decide on matters concerning selves. Thus, it is quite apparent that women in the middle class, both upper and lower are still not self-determining individuals. Social roles continue to be defined in accordance with traditional expectations.

Also, while forming friendships, particularistic norms continue to play some role as such relationships are usually based on class similarities i.e. with similar economic background and value systems.

Thus, it is quite interesting to note that in contemporary times, the middle class in India has not acquired a stable form and cannot be labeled as 'modern'.

15.7 Conclusion

At the outset, there would be a strong tendency to state that the middle class in urban India is modern, based on the fact that materialistically, there is a marked change, albeit slowly. While there is no denying the fact that consumer culture has still not taken a well-entrenched form in India, yet it must be conceded that consumption patterns of the urban Indian middle class is changing. Overt symbols such as cars, electronic goods, designer clothes are being used to portray progressive attitudes and supposedly modern status of individuals. However, to define class in terms of economic status alone will not be an adequate representation of the class situation in India. In this Unit, we have tried to bring out the fact that the basis for formation of social relations is an important criterion for understanding the middle class in India. Middle class in India cannot be defined as being completely modern. Modernisation is not just about possessing the latest electronic appliances and being technologically updated.

Rather it needs to be visible in the attitudes of people that come into effect in their social relations with others. Modernity brings in its wake new forms of social interaction. In the context of the urban middle class in India, lack of modernity is perceptible in most realms of the personal lives of people with social relations continuing to be embedded in traditional

expectations, norms and mores. Essentially, those living in this cosmopolitan city appear to be grappling with the difficult alternatives of tradition and modernity. Normative patterns and value orientations are still particularistic, ascriptive based and patriarchal. Choices in interpersonal relationships are socially controlled. Furthermore, social conditioning perpetuates reactions and thinking along expected lines that underline the predominant codes of a male dominated society. We are in no way suggesting that Indian middle class has not progressed at all. As Dipankar Gupta argues “though the past is in our present, it is not as if the past in its entirety is our present” (Gupta 2000: 206). Metamorphosis is taking place which is why people are appearing to be ambivalent in their thinking as is evident while conducting research amongst them on these aspects. Modernity brings in its wake contradictions and ambiguities in the minds of people as options available with them expand manifold. This phenomenon is being experienced by the urban middle class of India. Therefore, one can conclude that the social order is in a transitional stage with the traditional value system still being predominant in the tradition-modernity continuum.

15.8 Further Reading

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Unit 16

Gender, Caste and Class

Contents

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 What is Gender?
- 16.3 Gender and Caste
- 16.4 Gender and Class
- 16.5 Regional Variations in Gender, Caste and Class
- 16.6 Conclusion
- 16.7 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- ≈ define the concept of gender;
- ≈ explain the relationship between gender and caste;
- ≈ discuss the links between gender and class; and finally
- ≈ describe briefly the regional variations in gender, caste and class.

16.1 Introduction

So far you learnt about agrarian classes and categories, the working class and the middle class in India. In this unit we will explain the third kind of social stratification based on gender. Indian society is marked by multiplicity of languages, customs and cultural practices. Within the broad social hierarchy of caste and class, gender cuts across caste and class. In contemporary India gender, caste and class are dynamic phenomena, which vary between different regions and communities.

Since the previous units have already described to you the various aspects of caste and class system of stratification, here we will focus on the dynamics of gender a system of stratification and its various dimensions in Indian society. Gender roles are determined through the interaction of several factors such as material factors, the division of labour, constraints which are imposed through the processes of socialisation within family, caste, marriage and kinship organisation, inequality in inheritance and in access to resources for maintaining health, life and livelihood. Social hierarchies that exist within the family are also expressed and are visible outside in the realms of wage work on the basis of gender, caste and class.

Some of these factors are ideological factors based on domestic ideologies, religious beliefs, rituals and customs that reinforce inequality, and lead to the internalisation of hierarchies by women themselves. Most of the material and ideological factors are very deeprooted in our society and culture, in our social institutions, which play a significant role in sustaining and reproducing women's subordination in society.

16.2 What is Gender?

Gender is perhaps the oldest and the most enduring source of social differentiation. It is one that has claimed critical address only within the last

century. Within the academia, the conceptualisation and re-conceptualisation of gender, as an idea and as a set of practices, has occurred during the last three decades, which surely reveals the deeply political character of the issue that it raises. Further, gender encompasses the social division and cultural distinctions between women and men as well as the characteristics commonly associated within femininity and masculinity. It should be remembered, however, that gender could not be abstracted from the wider social relations with which it is enmeshed, that gender intersects other social divisions and inequalities such as class, race and sexuality, and that the meanings of masculinity and femininity vary within, as well as between societies. Gender does not replace the term sex, which refers exclusively to biological difference between men and women. Gender identities are plural, divided and potentially unstable, gender always includes the dynamics of ethnicity and class. Let us see how various sociologists have discussed the concept of gender.

1) Gender and Sex

Gender refers to the socially constructed and culturally determined roles that women and men play in their daily lives. It is a conceptual tool for analysis and has been used to highlight various structural relationships of inequality between men and women as manifested in labour markets and in political structures, as well as, in the household. 'Sex' on the other hand, refers to the biological differences between male and female, which are much the same across space and time. Gender, the socially constructed differences and relations between males and females, varies greatly from place to place and from time to time. Gender can therefore be defined as a notion that offers a set of frameworks within which the social and ideological construction and representation of differences between the sexes are explained. (Masefield. A. 1991).

According to a UNESCO document titled: "The Needs of Women", the definition of gender given by the international labour organisation refers to the social differences and relations between men and woman, which are learned, which vary widely among societies and cultures and change over time. The term gender does not replace the term sex, which refers exclusively to biological difference between men and woman. The term gender is used to analyse the role, responsibilities, constraints, needs of men and women in all areas and in any given social context. Gender involves power structure and economic relationships. Gender identities are plural, divided and potentially unstable. Gender always includes the dynamics of ethnicity and class.

2) Social Construction of Gender

Social scientists like E.D. Grey (1982: 39) believe that social construction is a continuous process in which both individual, as well as, wider social processes take a part. It is the process by which 'everyday sense of things' forms the foundation of the social construction of reality. Each and every construction is influenced by the individual understanding of the social actors and therefore it has obviously a subjective bias. Social construction of reality is also shaped, by the interests of particular groups and classes in a society. In this sense too it is biased. Generally, cultural values, norms, customs, languages, ideologies and institutional frameworks of society are used to justify particular social constructions with a view to projecting the subjective bias of groups and classes as rational and to make it broad based and legitimate. Hence, social construction through which we understand our

everyday experience, make moral judgements and classify other people according to religion, sex, caste etc. are culturally determined and can be changed. They shape social norms, values, customs, beliefs etc. and are also inculcated through them. The social processes like socialisation and education also help to make a particular kind of social construction enduring and widely accepted. Gender is a product of such social construction. It is also shaped within the given cultural apparatus of a society. (Kannaviran, K. 2000 FWE-01, IGNOU)

Gender or the cultural construction of the masculine and feminine, plays a crucial role in shaping institutions and practices in every society. It is important in order to understand the system of stratification and domination in terms of caste, class, race and especially the relations of power between men and women within a culture.

Reflection and Action 16.01

Reflect upon the customs and traditions of your family. Write a description of at least one ritual or ceremony, which discriminates men from women.

What are the implications of the ritual for your family and your own status? Discuss your account with other students of your Study Centre.

16.3 Gender and Caste

In Block-2 **Perspectives on Caste** of this course, **Sociology in India** you have already learnt about the various perspectives on caste in India – how the upper castes like the Brahmins viewed it, how the colonial rulers (the Britishers and other Europeans) viewed caste in India, and how other castes lower in the caste hierarchy perceived caste. Caste as a system of social stratification is said to have subsumed class in India. In the traditional Indian society, the upper castes were generally upper class having all the resources and power, social, political and economic in their favour. The lower castes were generally landless labourers or service castes that were low in status, economically poor and politically powerless.

It was only later that this harmony was disturbed during the colonial rule in India when land became a marketable commodity. The traditional power structure was disturbed and social mobility rate increased multifold due to the colonial impact and opening up of different occupational avenues, economic betterment of middle castes and some lower castes as well, such as the Jatavs of Agra (OM Lynch 1968 in Milton Singer (ed.) 1968).

There are various theories of the origin of caste in India, such as the theory of racial origin, origin in terms of occupational specialisation etc. But none of the writings on caste has looked at it in politically conscious or gendered terms and they do not address the issues of power, dominance and hegemony as key issues in caste society throughout its history. Kalpana Kannaviran in IGNOU FWE-01, Block 1: pp. 16) writes that any analysis of caste by Indians is by definition political. It either consciously chooses or unconsciously identifies with one of the two positions:

- a) supporting the status quo by proposing a case for the concentration of power in the hands of those who already have it, or
- b) engaging critically with the status quo by developing a critique of Indian tradition.

Needless to say, the most radical critique of caste and by extension, the Indian tradition, have come from intellectuals and political activists, from Dalit groups and anti-Brahmin movements, that is, critiques that have emerged from the life experience and world views of these groups. These critiques re-centre caste firmly within the socio-political and cultural realities of those whose labour and sexuality has been traditionally mis-appropriated by the hegemonic groups in caste society, namely the dominant castes.

She believes that the single most important arena for the gendering of caste occurs in the arena of sexuality. The desire to regulate female sexuality has led to a considerable ritual preoccupation with female purity in the caste societies of Sri Lanka and India. Predictably, male sexuality is not ritualised in the same way.

Box 16.02: Low Female Male Ratio (FMR) in Uttar Pradesh

Leiten and Srivastava (1999 : 71) say that Uttar Pradesh has among the lowest Female-Male ratio (FMR) in the world, and the lowest in India, with the exception of Haryana. A closer look at the regional dissimilarities shows that the 'epicentre' of the problem of low FMR is not in Haryana but in western Uttar Pradesh. This region has more than one third of the population of the entire state and nearly three times the population of Haryana. Also, this region has the lowest FMR of only 0.84.

I) Construction of Gender and Rituals

As is well known, rituals reveal a lot about the gender construction in a particular society. Amongst the Kandyan Singhalese, Yalman (1963) highlights two important ceremonies.

- i) The most important ritual for Kandyan Children, which is gender differentiated is the ear piercing ceremony for girls before they attain puberty.
- ii) The second and by far the most significant ritual is the one that marks the onset of male puberty.

Here, as well as in many caste communities of the South of India, there are specific rituals which are performed when a girl begins to menstruate. The rites of passage marking her entry into adulthood is publicly celebrated and rituals are performed. During the period of menstruation she is confined into a hut or a closed room so that she does not pollute others nor does harm come to her. The segregation is partly to protect her from hostile powers and demons that are attracted to her at this time. Elaborate rituals surround the girl's purification after her first period. (Yalman, N. 1963 : 25)

What is the need for only girls to go through these rituals? As believed by the villagers themselves amongst the Singhalese, Yalman reports, these rituals relate as much to female fertility as to more honour. The villagers say that:

- i) It protects the fecundity of the womb of the woman and
- ii) "This is necessary since the honour and respectability of men is protected and preserved through their women".

II) Caste and Regulation of Sexuality and Reproduction

Thus, it is very clear that caste and gender are closely related since the question of sexuality of women is directly linked with the purity of the race,

honour of the men. Therefore, the higher the caste, the more controlled would be the sexuality of their women. In caste societies, such as, Sri Lanka and India, more so in the upper castes than the lower castes, elaborate institutions of hypergamy – where women can cohabit only with men of their own caste or of a superior caste is practised. They cannot marry a man who is lower in caste status than their own. Kannaviran (2000 : 17) says that women as seen through the lens of the dominant castes are mere receptacles for the male seed. The purity of the receptacle (here, women's womb) then ensures the purity of the offspring and sets to rest doubts about paternity. As said earlier, the control and concern over female sexuality are greatest in the castes which have the highest stakes in the material assets of society i.e. the upper castes and classes.

The concern with marriage networks, endogamy and exogamy being crucial to the maintenance of the caste system where men regulate the system through the exchange of or control over women is central to any discussion on caste. The customary right of male family members to exchange female members in marriage, according to Lerner, antedated the development of the patriarchy and created the conditions for the development of the family. In India, the customary right acquired a further economic significance with the development of private property and caste stratification. The primary consideration in the forming of marriage alliances was and still is, the maximising of family fortunes. Women play a crucial economic role not only by providing free domestic labour, but also through their reproductive services. Lerner argues that it was the sexual and reproductive services of women that were cared under patriarchy, not women themselves. (Lerner, G. 1986 quoted in IGNOU 2000 FWE-01, Block 1)

The commodification of women in the marriage market in patriarchal, patrilineal caste society goes hand in hand with prescriptions for women's behaviour and restrictions on their mobility, the dispossession of women in property and inheritance matters, and their absence in local level political and decision making bodies. The entire complex constituting the construction of gender in caste society is a construction that radically devalues the status of women in these societies (Kannaviran, K. 2000 : 17)

III) Changing Caste System and its Impact on Women

In contemporary India, many constraints on women due to their caste identity have been greatly reduced. In capitalist India, several new social classes have emerged. However, this does not mean that the age-old subordination of women has disappeared. The emergence of new classes has meant control of women in new and different forms from those under the caste system. Let us examine some of the issues related with gender and class in the next section.

16.4 Gender and Class

In order to understand women's status in traditional as well as contemporary Indian society it is imperative to understand the class concept in determining the status of women in society. Many scholars consider caste and class as polar opposites. According to them caste and class are different forms of social stratification. The units ranked in the class system are individuals, and those ranked in the caste system are groups. Therefore, change takes place from caste to class, hierarchy to stratification, closed to open and from organic to segmentary system. In reality both caste and class are real and

empirical and both interactional and hierarchical, in fact, both incorporate each other. (Kaur, Kuldip 2000 : 34, WED-01, Block-3, IGNOU)

The caste and class nexus is highlighted by Kathleen Gough in her analysis of the mode of production as a social formation in which she finds connections between caste, kinship, family and marriage on the one hand and forces of production and productive relations on the other. Class relationships are taken as the main assumptions in the treatment of caste and kinship in India. Some scholars have even explained the Varna and Jajmani system (about which you learnt in Block-4 **Perspectives on Caste**) in terms of class relations and the mode of production. Therefore, we can say that caste incorporates class, class incorporates caste. (Gough, 1980 quoted in IGNOU: WED-01, Block-3)

The caste-class nexus is related with the status of working women in urban and rural India. Andre Beteille in his book “Six Essays in Comparative Sociology” has highlighted this aspect. He asks the relevant question – How are we to view families in which men work in the fields but women are by custom debarred from such work? This is quite prevalent among the families of the upper castes. Even among some families of the intermediate and lower castes who have become economically well off have adopted this norm with a view to elevate their social status in the village community. But it does not mean that this position leads to equal treatment being meted out to women. Withdrawal from work only results in elevation of family status. But as explained by Beteille (1974) this also arises from caste to caste, and also depends upon the economic and social standing of particular families.

Box 16.03: “Sanskritisation” of Lower Castes in Uttar Pradesh

The negative aspect of ‘Sanskritisation’ (i.e. adopting the norms and values and style of life of the upper castes by the lower castes to gain higher social status) seems to be the fall-out of general upward economic mobility. However, “this economic mobility leads to the ‘domestication’ of women and a fall in their status and value”. (Dreze & Sen A. 1995 : 158)

Andre Beleille also comments upon the process of change in the status of women in the context of manual labour. He points out how women are first withdrawn from the family farm. Finally, with economic mobility, the men, too, either withdraw from work, or change their role from cultivator to supervisor. Therefore withdrawing womenfolk from manual labour on farms is a symbol of high social status in the countryside. Due to variation in life styles, the caste duties differ from one caste to another or one class to another. But inspite of the differences of caste backgrounds, the status of women across castes does not differ in comparison with men. So far as the ideology of the ‘Pativrata’ is concerned, which directs women to maintain male authority in all castes. applies to women of all castes and class. (Kaur, Kuldip 2000 : 35 quoted in IGNOU 2000 : WED, Block-3)

New Social Classes and Status of Women

A study of classes in India shows that it is a very complex phenomena. Infact, the rise of new classes among different communities is an uneven phenomena. During, the British period, Indian society was exposed to certain new forces as mentioned earlier e.g. the Western system of education, the new land settlements and the provision of new transport facilities such as the railways. This phenomena led to a lot of changes in the caste/class

relationships. In rural India there emerged a new class especially in Bengal Presidency called the Zamindars. Under the new settlement the right of ownership was conferred on the Zamindars. According to the new settlement, failure on the part of some Zamindars to pay the fixed revenue led to the auction of portions of large estates. This in turn, led to the entry of new classes of landlords who were primarily the merchants and money lenders. Besides the zamindars, the peasants formed an important social class in rural India. The peasantry in India is not a homogeneous category. It consists of (i) the rich class, (ii) the middle class and (iii) the poor peasants. Along with the peasantry the artisan class also formed an important part of the village community. The artisans mainly consisted of carpenters (Badhai), the ironsmith (Lohar), the potter (Kumhar), and the goldsmith (Sonar).

Within the above mentioned classes the status of women has varied. Among the above classes women generally occupied a secondary place – interestingly, this phenomenon continues to exist in contemporary times. Given below are some tables that portray the status of women among different economic classes.

Table 1
Percentage Distribution of Female Main Workers by
Industrial Category in India, 1981 and 1991

Industrial Category	1981			1991		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Cultivators	33.09	36.04	4.63	34.22	38.53	5.13
Agricultural Labourers	46.34	50.36	16.65	44.93	49.32	15.61
Livestock, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting, Plantations and Allied Activities	1.83	1.84	1.77	1.60	1.61	1.52
Mining & Quarrying	0.35	0.31	0.69	0.34	0.29	0.68
Manufacturing, Processing, Servicing & Repairs						
a) Household Industry	4.57	3.77	10.44	3.53	2.93	7.53
b) Other than Household Industry	3.60	2.11	14.59	3.88	2.34	14.14
Construction	0.87	0.56	3.10	0.66	0.27	3.30
Trade and Commerce	2.04	1.12	8.92	2.26	1.10	10.01
Transport, Storage & Communications	0.37	0.11	2.24	0.32	0.08	1.94
Other Services	6.94	2.88	36.97	8.26	3.48	40.14

Source: Census of India, 1991, Final Population Totals, series-I, India, Paper 2 of 1992, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, New Delhi] 1993.

The above table clearly depicts that the percentage of female workers in the industrial category has increased over the years. The percentage of women cultivators and agricultural labourers has not only increased but is the largest sector that employs women.

Table 2
Women in the Organised Sector
(In lakhs)

Year	Public Sector		Private Sector		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1971	98.7 (92.0)	8.6 (8.6)	56.8 (84.0)	10.8 (16.0)	155.6 (89.0)	19.3 (11.0)
1981	139.8 (90.3)	14.9 (9.7)	61.0 (82.5)	12.9 (17.5)	200.5 (87.8)	27.93 (12.2)
1991	167.1 (87.7)	23.4 (12.3)	62.4 (81.3)	14.3 (18.7)	229.5 (85.9)	37.81 (14.1)
1993	168.4	24.7	63.0	15.5	231.4	40.27

Source: DGE and T, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, New Delhi.

The above table portrays that women are largely employed in private sector enterprise.

The state wise break up is given in table (3)

Table 3
Table Employment Statistics, 1991

India/State	Employment of Women (in thousands) as on 31.3.99		
	Public Sector	Private Sector	Total
India	2810.7	2018.4	4829.2
1. Andhra Pradesh	216.3	183.0	399.3
2. Arunachal Pradesh	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
3. Assam	73.2	238.9	312.1
4. Bihar	90.1	17.4	107.5
5. Chhattisgarh	-	%	%
6. Delhi	90.7	29.3	120.1
7. Goa	14.9	7.4	22.3
8. Gujarat	144.7	78.1	222.8
9. Haryana	63.4	24.5	87.9
10. Himachal Pradesh	38.8	5.7	44.5
11. Jammu & Kashmir	20.7	1.9	22.6
12. Jharkhand	%	%	%
13. Karnataka	234.6	310.5	545.1
14. Kerala	191.5	275.2	466.7
15. Madhya Pradesh	162.5	26.7	189.3
16. Maharashtra	350.6	207.8	558.4
17. Manipur	17.4	0.8	18.2
18. Meghalaya	14.6	4.3	18.9

19. Mizoram	10.4	0.6	11.0
20. Nagaland	1.6	1.1	12.7
21. Orissa	83.9	10.9	94.8
22. Punjab	100.7	31.1	131.8
23. Rajasthan	129.6	42.0	171.5
24. Sikkim	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
25. Tamil Nadu	414.0	325.7	739.8
26. Tripura	17.5	4.7	22.1
27. Uttar Pradesh	184.9	54.4	239.3
28. Uttaranchal	%	%	%
29. West Bengal	111.7	128.8	240.4
30. Andaman & Nicobar Island	3.1	0.1	3.3
31. Chandigarh	12.4	4.7	17.1
32. Dadra & Nagar Haveli	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
33. Daman & Diu	0.2	1.4	1.6
34. Lakshadweep	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
35. Pondicherry	6.6	1.5	8.1

Source: India, Ministry of Labour, DGET Employment Review January-March 1999, p. 23.

It is significant to note that the above table depicts that the status of women has fluctuated in different economic sectors. However in the North-East region especially among the Khasis and the Gharos the status of women is high both economically and socially. Among the Khasis in Meghalaya the ancestral property is inherited by females. One of the distinguishing feature of the Khasi family structure is that women hold property. Infact, they are the hub of the economy, and the youngest daughter performs all the religious rites, yet the outside world is dominated by men. They have a saying “war and politics for men, property and children for women” (Tiplut Nongbri 1994).

Reflection and Action 16.02

Recount a short incidence about your experience regarding the status of women in a patriarchal family system or a matriarchal set-up. Write a short note of about a page. Compare it, if possible, with other students at your Study Centre.

16.5 Regional Variations in Gender, Caste and Class

As stated earlier, gender class and caste relationships are highly complex and dynamic phenomena. In a patriarchal family system which exists in the northern belt of India and among Brahmins, Thakurs, Kayasthas and Banias the womenfolk occupy a secondary place in the family. In such families power is wielded by the eldest male members or other males in the family. Prevalent customs like child marriage, enforced widowhood, sati purdah etc. purdah have had an adverse impact on the status of women. The above mentioned customs, along with socialisation practice have led to the girls/

women occupying a subordinate position in the family. Further, women's education in such families is not valued. Field studies have shown that violence in patriarchal families have been reported to be higher. According to Vina Mazumdar, "we remember that this region (India) had thrown up some of the most powerful women rulers in the world, but they did not work for restructuring of the social order, eliminating patriarchal institutions. We have taken pride in their successful defence of national sovereignty and leadership role in defending third world interest in global fora. But as prisoners of power in hierarchical global and national social order, they could not be creators or defenders of democracy from below. Nor could they even begin the task of eliminating the subordination of women in the masses."

Leela Dube also states in her work – "Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South East Asia" that it is a peculiarity of South Asia that the female sex is denied the right to be born, to survive after birth, and to live a healthy life avoiding the risks of pregnancy and childbirth. The under valuing of women across different castes, classes and even regions has had an impact on the educational status of women as well as their ratio in the total population of India. Given below are tables depicting the literacy rate, as well as sex ratio of women in India. These are self-explanatory where status of women in India is concerned.

Table 4
Literate and Literacy Rates by Sex : 2001

S.No.	India/State/Union Territory*	Literacy rate #		
		Person	Males	Females
1	2	3	4	5
	India	6538	7585	5416
01	Jammu & Kashmir	5446	6575	4182
02	Himachal Pradesh	7713	8602	6808
03	Punjab	6995	7563	6355
04	Chandigarh*	8176	8565	7665
05	Uttaranchal	7228	8401	6026
06	Haryana	6859	7925	5631
07	Delhi*	8182	8737	7500
08	Rajasthan	6103	7646	4434
09	Uttar Pradesh	5736	7023	4298
10	Bihar	4753	6032	3357
11	Sikkim	6968	7673	6146
12	Arunachal Pradesh	5474	6407	4424
13	Nagaland	6711	7177	6192
14	Manipur	6887	7787	5970
15	Mizoram	8849	9069	8613
16	Tripura	7366	8147	6541
17	Meghalaya	6331	6614	6041
18	Assam	6428	7193	5603
19	West Bengal	6922	7758	6022

20	Jharkhand	5413	6794	3938
21	Orissa	6361	7595	5097
22	Chhattisgarh	6518	7786	5240
23	Madhya Pradesh	6411	7680	5028
24	Gujarat*	6997	8050	5860
25	Daman & Diu*	8109	8840	7037
26	Dadra & Nagar Haveli*	6003	7332	4299
27	Maharashtra	7727	8627	6751
28	Andhra Pradesh	6111	7085	5117
29	Karnataka	6704	7629	5745
30	Goa	8232	8888	7557
31	Lakshadweep*	8752	8315	8156
32	Kerala	9092	9420	8786
33	Tamil Nadu	7374	8233	6455
34	Pondicherry*	8149	8889	7413
35	Andaman & Nicobar Islands*	8118	8607	7529

Table 5
Population and Sex-Ratio

S.No.	India/State/Union Territory*	Literacy rate #			
		Person	Males	Females	Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)
1	2	3	4	5	6
	India	1027015247	531277078	495738169	933
01	Jammu & Kashmir	10069917	5300574	4769343	900
02	Himachal Pradesh	6077248	3085256	2991992	970
03	Punjab	24289296	12963362	11325934	874
04	Chandigarh*	900914	508224	392690	773
05	Uttaranchal	8479562	4316401	4163161	964
06	Haryana	21082989	11327658	9755331	861
07	Delhi*	13782976	7570890	6212086	821
08	Rajasthan	56473122	29381657	27091465	922
09	Uttar Pradesh	166052859	87466301	78586558	898
10	Bihar	82878796	43153964	39724832	921
11	Sikkim	540493	288217	252276	875
12	Arunachal Pradesh	1091117	573951	517166	901
13	Nagaland	1988636	1041686	946950	909
14	Manipur	2388634	1207338	1181296	978
15	Mizoram	891058	459783	431275	938

16	Tripura	3191168	1636138	1555030	950
17	Meghalaya	2306069	1167840	1138229	975
18	Assam	26638407	13787799	12850608	932
19	West Bengal	80221171	41487694	38733477	934
20	Jharkhand	26909428	13861277	13048151	941
21	Orissa	36706920	18612340	18094580	972
22	Chhattisgarh	20795956	10452426	10343530	990
23	Madhya Pradesh	60385118	31456873	28928245	920
24	Gujarat*	50596992	26344053	24252939	921
25	Daman & Diu*	158059	92478	65581	709
26	Dadra & Nagar Haveli*	220451	121731	98720	811
27	Maharashtra	96752247	50334270	46417977	922
28	Andhra Pradesh	75727541	38286811	37440730	978
29	Karnataka	52733958	26856343	25877615	964
30	Goa	1343998	685617	658381	960
31	Lakshadweep*	60595	31118	29477	947
32	Kerala	31838619	15468664	26369955	1058
33	Tamil Nadu	62110829	31268654	30842185	986
34	Pondicherry*	973829	486705	487124	1001
35	Andaman & Nicobar Islands*	356265	192985	163280	846

16.6 Conclusion

In this unit an attempt has been made to examine the close relationship between gender, caste and class in the Indian context. An in-depth definition of gender, caste and class is also stated. An analysis of the position of women within the different castes in India has been described. The relationship between caste and class in the context of gender has been explained. Further, an attempt has been made to discuss the participation of women in different sectors of the economy such as the public and private sectors through tables. Finally the regional variation of status of women in patriarchal and matriarchal families is discussed. The table mentioning the literacy rate and sex ratio of women state-wise highlighting the regional variations is also given.

16.7 Further Reading

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Glossary

Sociography	:	It refers to descriptive studies of both a qualitative and a quantitative kind. It was used first by Ferdinand Tonnies who placed great emphasis on the use of statistics. For him sociography means descriptive sociological studies using statistics.
Suzerainty	:	The right of a country to rule over another country.
Empirical	:	Any field of study, which may or may not have an explicit theory, is seen as a different order of inquiry from that which either (a) sets out a conceptual language for analysing social relations or (b) outlines a theory or explanation of some aspect of social life without testing its truth or falsity. (Mitchel, Dumcan G. 1968 : 65)
Conservatives	:	Those scholars and thinkers who resisted change from the traditional order.
Utilitarian rationalism	:	Its a philosophical outlook associated with the name of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) in whose thought, ethics and psychology rest on the fundamental fact that pleasure is better than pain. Utility is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The maximisation of utility is the proper end of humankind. (I vid 1968)
Pragmatic	:	Solving problems in a practical and sensible way rather than by having fixed ideas or theories.
Demographic	:	The changes in the number of births, deaths, diseases etc. in a population over a period of time.
Structural	:	Anything related with the network of social relationships in a society, which are institutionalised.
Ideological	:	A set of beliefs and ideas, especially one held by a particular group of people that influences their behaviour.
Field-View	:	View of social scientists based on first-hand observation or field work of the area of study. It refers to the way a system, for eg. caste system, functions in reality in different communities in India.
Decolonisation	:	It is the process of the colony such as India becoming independent.
Differentiated	:	When each part takes up a different function or specialisation in a society.
Mechanisation	:	Technological advance when dependence on manual labour shifts to the use of machines.

Modernisation	: The process of becoming more modern or contemporary. It applies to the use of technology, changes in values, beliefs and ideas etc.
Patronage	: The institution of giving protection to the lower castes, in terms of cash and kind and receiving services from them in lieu of it by the upper castes or the relationship between lords and peasants.
Loyalty	: Refers to the obligation that the peasants or the lower castes felt for the Lord or the upper caste landowner who gave them protection.
Affinity	: Relationship by marriage is described as 'affinity'.
Agnate	: Related through male descent or on the father's side.
Alliance	: In the context of kinship studies, the bond between two families following a marriage is described as relationship of 'alliance'.
Clan	: A group united through a belief that they have a common ancestor, is called a clan. In the context of Indian society, subcaste sharing a common <i>gotra</i> is called a clan.
Consanguinity	: It refers to the state of being related by blood. All blood relatives of a person are his/her consanguine.
Descent	: Derivation from an ancestor is called descent. There are various ways of derivation and hence different systems of descent are found in human societies.
Endogamy	: When marriage is specifically required within a group, this specification is called the rule of endogamy.
Exogamy	: When marriage is specifically required outside a group, this specification is called the rule of exogamy.
Hypergamy	: When marriage is specifically required in an equal or higher social group or subcaste, this specification is called the rule of hypergamy.
Neolocal	: This term refers to residence after marriage. In this type of residence, the husband and the wife set up an independent household.
Patrilocal	: In this type of residence, after marriage, the married couple lives with the husband's father's family.

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