

Unit 13

Agrarian Classes and Categories

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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 declines 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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