UNIT 5 INEQUALITY: CASTE AND CLASS

Structure

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

The normative and democratic pillars of institutions and doctrines enshrined in the Constitution of India set the agenda of post-colonial state in India in terms of abolition or at least reduction of social-inequalities. The objective of 'welfare' state was to make a modern caste-less society by reducing centuries old disabilities inflicted upon the 'depressed' and attempt to improve their lot by providing them 'reservations' and 'quotas' in education as well as job market especially in state-bureaucracy and over-sized public sector enterprises. The Constitution of India requires the state to treat all citizens equally, without regard to birth, gender or religious belief. However, society does not function merely on the basis of formal principles. Enforcement of legal doctrines and attempt to remove social discrimination is a process entangled in the complexities of social formation. The pernicious aspects of *jati, varna* and class, therefore, still permeate our families, localities and political institutions. In this unit, our focus will be on various aspects of social inequality and their impact on democratic polity and political economy of development in the post-colonial state of India.

5.2 NOTION OF SOCIAL-INEQUALITY

Human societies vary in the extent to which social groups as well as individuals have unequal access to advantages. Rousseau had made a distinction between natural and social inequality. The former emerge from the unequal division of physical and mental abilities among the members of a society. The latter arise from the social entitlement of people to wealth or economic resources, political power and status regardless of potential abilities possessed by individuals. Not only economic resources of societies vary according to the level of development and structural features of society, but also different groups tend to have differential access to these resources. Power enjoyed by the social groups also differ and offers another related social advantage. Similarly, conventions, rules, customs and laws confer greater prestige and status on certain groups and occupations in most human societies. Hierarchy, stratification, class-divisions are notions used by anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists to describe and denote social-inequality. Anthropologists generally distinguish three types of societies in terms of social-inequality. These are classified as egalitarian, rank and class societies.

Egalitarian societies contain fair amount of equality and no social group enjoys greater access to economic resources, power or prestige. Rank societies do not have unequal access to wealth or power, but they do contain social groups that enjoy greater honour and status. A pre-literate tribal society in which social ranking is based on rules of descent and alliances belong to this category. The complex class societies have unequal access and entitlement to economic resources, power and status.

In many pre-industrial agrarian societies, access to social opportunities and status was determined by birth. The ascribed role or status of individual was assigned by virtue of factors outside his or her own control such as birth, sex, age, kinship relations, and caste. This assigned role was rationalised as divinely ordained and natural. The estates or orders of medieval Europe were unequally ranked and this hierarchy of ranks was legally recognised and approved by religious-normative order of the society. Indian caste system was another type of validation of social hierarchy. The individual's professional or occupational role came to depend on individual effort and ability in the modern industrial and democratic society. This new role was emphasised in the political discourse of modernity and was seen as consonant with the democratic ideal. It involved an exercise of effort and choice as well as a fair deal of competition to occupy a given position. The society moved from the principle of hierarchy to stratification. According to the sociologists, hierarchy prevailed in societies based on castes or estates and social-inequalities were legitimated as naturally given. Stratification, on the other hand, is a feature of modern industrial societies in which inequalities do exist but are not considered as a part of natural or divine order. In this process of social change, inequality did not vanish or reduce, but changed its nature. Now class boundaries became more porous and permeable, individual mobility is possible and society's normative order is based on formal equality. However, there is still a large area of industrial society where roles are allocated by virtue of being male or female, black or white and so on.

G.D. Berreman suggests that out of 'differentiation' of persons, which is a natural and universal phenomenon, inequality or social evaluation of differences arises. He terms the behavioural expression of inequality as 'dominance' and combination of inequality and dominance is social-inequality. Dominance and status in egalitarian societies is often negotiable and contextual whereas in ranked or inegalitarian societies, inequality is institutionalised. It is embedded in a hierarchy of statuses and is not linked to individual differences of ability. Marxists generally tend to view gradations of power and status as correlated to the distinctions of class defined by economic position and accessibility of economic entitlements. In the Weberian paradigm, however, status and power are not entirely governed by economic divisions or control over economic entitlements. Although the term stratification reminds us of a geological image which signifies a sort of vertical layering or arrangement of social strata, social organisation is much more fluid and complex. A multiple set of factors affect a particular social formation and it is never a simple vertical or hierarchical arrangement of layers like the earth's crust. Political thinkers like Pareto, Mosca and Michels assigned primacy to power as the real source of inequality in society. According to them, power is the ability to make others do what they do not want to do and the elite groups exercise this power as they occupy the top positions within the institutions of a given society. Similarly, French scholar Bourdieu employs terms symbolic capital and distinction to identify social groups who enjoy more prestige and honour in society simply because they are endowed with more symbolic capital reflected in their pattern of

behaviour and taste. The notion of social-capital also has similar connotations. It demonstrates how certain social groups have greater capacity to form social-relations and competence to associate with others. They indicate that differences in terms of esteem, prestige and status rather than neat economic or political hierarchy may play the dominant role in some systems of stratifications.

5.3 THE NATURE OF CASTE-INEQUALITIES IN INDIA

Caste is the most contentious issue that has fascinated and divided scholars who have wished to study this system of stratified social-hierarchy in India. There is an enormous body of academic writing and political polemic on the issue. These are basically the part of debate on the transformation of Indian society under the impact of colonialism and its administrative mechanisms. Some argue for the continuities of pre-colonial social-structures including caste. Others stress the basic qualitative changes introduced by the colonial rulers.

Louis Dumont, the French scholar and writer of a famous book on caste, *Homo-Hierarchicus*, constructed a textually-informed image of caste. In this image, two opposing conceptual categories of purity and pollution are the core elements of caste-structure. These unique core principles of caste-hierarchy, according to Dumont, are observed in scriptural formulation as well as the every-day life of all Hindus. In other words, these values separate Indians culturally from the Western civilisation, making India a land of static, unchangeable, 'oriental' Brahmanical values. This notion of caste has been challenged by Nicholas Dirks and others. Dumont's notion was criticised as it failed to explain the social change, dynamism and individualistic strivings even within the traditional Indian society. Gerald Berreman pointed out that the principle of Brahmanical hierarchy was not uniformly followed by all Hindus. He also criticised the Dumontian notion that power and economic factors are distinct and epiphenomenal to caste. It has been pointed out by others that caste hierarchy is not a fixed hierarchy; rather it is context-specific and fluid and contains seeds of contestation among various castes. Nicholas Dirks cites ethnographic and textual evidence to demonstrate that Brahmins and their texts were not so central to the social fabric of Indian life. According to this view, power-relations and command over men and resources were more important. Brahmins were merely ritual specialists, often subordinate to powerful ruling families. The caste-based scriptural or Brahmanical model of traditional India was an invention of the British Orientalists and ethnographers, according to this view. However, caste played a very critical role in the Indian social-reformers' and nationalists' perception of caste. It was certainly not a mere product of British imagination.

5.4 CASTE AS THE INVENTION OF COLONIAL MODERNITY OR A LEGACY OF BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS

As we hinted above, two opposing viewpoints see caste differently. Some view it as an unchanged survival of Brahmanical traditions of India. According to this view, Brahmanism represents a core civilisational value and caste is the central symbol of this value. It is the basic

expression of the pre-colonial traditions of India. Contrary to this view, Nicolas Dirks, in his *Castes of Mind* (2001), argues that caste is a product of colonial modernity. By this he does not mean that caste did not exist before the advent of British. He is simply suggesting that caste became a single, unique category under the British rule that expressed and provided the sole index of understanding India. Earlier there were diverse forms of social-identity and community in India. The British reduced everything to a single explanatory category of caste. It was the colonial state and its administrators who made caste into a uniform, all-encompassing and ideologically consistent organism. They made caste a measure of all things and the most important emblem of traditions. Colonialism reconstructed cultural forms and social-institutions like caste to create a line of difference and demarcation between themselves as European modern and the colonised Asian traditional subjects. In other words, British colonialism played a critical role in both the identification and production of Indian 'tradition'. The colonial modernity devalued the so called Indian traditions. Simultaneously, it also transformed them. Caste was recast as the spiritual essence of India that regulated and mediated the private domain. Caste-ridden Indian society was different from the European civil society because caste was opposed to the basic premises of individualism as well as the collective identity of a nation. The salience of this pre-colonial identity and sense of loyalty could easily be used to justify the rule by the colonial modern administrators. So, according to Dirks, it was the colonial rule of India that organised the 'social difference and deference' solely in terms of caste.

The attempts to downplay or dismiss the significance of Brahmins and Brahmanical order is not in accordance with familiar historical records and persistence of caste-identities even in the contemporary Indian social life. Caste-terms and principles were certainly not in universal use in pre-colonial periods. Caste in its various manifestations and forms was also not an immutable entity. However, starting from the *Vedas* and the Great Epics, from Manu and other *dharmasastras*, from *puranas*, from ritual practices, the penal system of Peshwa rulers who punished culprits according to caste-principles, to the denunciations of anti-Brahmanical 'reformers' of all ages, everything points towards the legacy of pre-colonial times. It is true that there were also non-caste affiliations and identities such as networks of settlements connected by matrimonial alliances, trade, commerce and state service in the pre-colonial times. However, caste was also a characteristic marker of identity and a prevailing social-metaphor. Caste was not merely a fabrication of British rulers designed to demean and subjugate Indians. It did serve the colonial interests by condemning the 'Brahmanical tyranny', colonial administration could easily justify their codes to 'civilise' and 'improve' the 'fallen people'. Moreover, strengthening of the caste-hierarchy could also act as a bulwark against anarchy.

5.5 NATURE OF CLASS INEQUALITY IN INDIA

Class societies are characterised by the horizontal division of society into strata. In Marxist terms, classes are defined by their differential access to the means of production. The dominant classes appropriate the 'surplus' produced by other classes through their control of means of production, and thus exploit their labour. The actual configuration of social classes varies from one society to another. The rise and growth of Indian social classes was organically linked to the basic structure of colonialism and bore the imprint of that association.

What constitutes the dominant proprietary class in the urban-areas is marked by plurality and heterogeneity in its composition. A clear-cut demarcation along the lines of merchant, industrial and finance capital is not possible in case of India. The Indian business classes exhibit a complex intertwining of functions. Under the colonial rule, the Indian businessmen were initially relegated to small private trade, money lending and acted as agents of foreign British Capital. The British capitalists and merchants controlled the upper layer of Indian economy represented by the big joint stock companies, managing houses, banking and insurance and major export-import firms. Despite obstacles and constraints, the Indian capitalist class grew slowly and steadily and breached white 'collective monopoly'. With all structural constraints, colonialism also guaranteed the security of private property and sanctity of contract, the basic legal elements required for a market-led growth. The expansion of foreign trade and commercialisation eased the capital shortage and accelerated the growth of sectors where cost of raw-materials was low such as cotton textiles, sugar, leather, cement, tobacco and steel. Certain groups of Parsis, Marwaris, the Khojas, the Bhatias and Gujarati traders benefited from their collaboration with the European companies and pumped their resources into the manufacturing sector. This Indian capitalist class grew, diversified to some extent and acquired important position by 1940s. This class thrived during Independence under the government's policy of import-substitution and quantitative controls. The 'Public- Sector' units provided the infrastructure and the intermediate and capital goods to this 'protected' class while the public lending institutions provided it with cheap sources of finances. The assets of the biggest 20 industrial houses increased from Rs. 500 crores in 1851 to Rs 23,200 crores in 1986. This was the result of benefits derived from state-developed infrastructural facilities, subsidised energy inputs, cheap capital goods and long-term finance made available to these by big monopoly industrial houses under the planning. On the other hand, almost 70% of the people exist on merely subsistence level and 76.6 million agricultural labourers earn only one-tenth of what an organised sector worker in the city earns. In the 1980s, unemployment reached about 10% of total active population. In the urban centres, the bulk of labourers are working in unorganised informal sectors. The vast army of pavement vendors, domestic servants, porters and street hawkers represent a kind of disguised urban unemployment.

The class-composition in the rural areas also bears the stamp of colonialism. The older group of rural gentry, although its wings were clipped away by the British colonial regime, was retained and transformed into a kind of rentier class of landlords invested with newly defined property rights on land. This was especially true of permanently settled Zamindari areas of Bengal and Taluqdari areas of Awadh. This landlord-rentier class generally emerged from the pre-existing groups' of Zamindars and Taluqdars who had enjoyed the rights of revenue-collection under the pre-British regimes. They exercised "extra-economic' feudal coercion over their small marginal share-croppers. Since the Congress Party favoured a bureaucratic rather than mobilisational form for carrying out a gradual social transformation after Independence, the power and privileges of these semi-feudal agrarian magnates remained intact in some areas. These classes now managed the new democratic polity. The failure to implement radical agrarian reforms meant that the availability of resources and accessibility to spaces within the new polity to the socially marginal groups remained limited.

The rich farmers, however, are numerically the most important proprietary class in the rural areas. In areas outside Zamindari settled areas of Bengal, the colonial state settled land-

revenue with dominant cultivating groups. A class of rich farmers emerged from these groups. They took advantage of the expanding market networks under the colonial economy and they had resources like sufficient arable land, livestock, implements and better access to credit. They also became less dependent on money lenders and they took to usury themselves. The Jat peasants of Punjab and the Upper Doab, the Vellalas in Tamilnadu, the Kanbi-Patidars of South Gujarat, the Lingayats of Karnataka and the Kamma-Reddy farmers of Andhra constituted this group. The tenancy legislation under colonialism and after Independence initiated the process of transfer of landed resources from non-cultivating, absentee landlords to the enterprising rich farmers. Some older groups of rentier landlords also converted themselves into this class. The political clout of this class grew as it drew encouragement from state's policy of providing price-supports to agricultural produce and from liberal provisions of subsidised inputs such as water, power, fertilizers, diesel, credit and agricultural machinery. This class is easily identifiable by the ownership of landed and other agricultural resources. In 1970s, about 20% households of the rich farmers owned about 63% of rural assets such as land, livestock, building, and implements. This disproportionate access to rural assets is combined by its control over wage labour which is used to produce a sizeable marketable surplus by this class. The other pole of rural social-structure is the world of semi-proletariat having little or no control over productive resources. The agricultural labourers are a pre-dominant group with little or no guarantee of a regular employment, often burdened by coercive domination of rich farmers.

The bureaucratic-managerial elite also constitute a significant class in India as the relatively weak capitalist class at the time of India's Independence was not in a position to completely subordinate the highly developed administrative state apparatus. The growth of non-market mechanisms and planning in the allocation of resources and economic patronage also resulted in the expansion of bureaucracy. This class expanded in the post-colonial phase with the spreading out of education and need for professional and white-collar jobs involving new skills and expertise. This is not merely an auxiliary class of bourgeois as there are conflicts of interests between the public sector professionals and private capital. The command over knowledge, skills, tastes and networks of relationships are notable features of this class.

5.6 INTERRELATION OF CASTE AND CLASS HIERARCHIES

Caste and class point towards inequality and hierarchy. In both the cases, however, the principle of organisation differs. The core features of caste are: endogamy or marriage within caste, occupational differentiation and hereditary specialisation of occupations, notion of pollution and a ritual hierarchy in which Brahmins are generally at the top. Classes, on the other hand, broadly refer to economic basis of ownership or non-ownership relation to the means of production. But how does caste and class correlate to each other? Classes are sub-divided in terms of types of ownership and control of economic resources and the type of services contributed to the process of production. The Brahmanical ritual hierarchy of the caste is also not universally applicable and upheld by all. In many cases, ritual hierarchy is only contextual. The prosperous Jats in North India enjoy social and political dominance without equivalent ritual status. In most popular renditions of caste, hierarchy alone is emphasised and that too

from Brahmanical point of view. Sometimes, however, caste works as a discrete community, without hierarchical relationship to other segments of society. Our conceptual categories do not always recapture the existing social reality. For instance, a conceptual distinction is often made between sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. In actual life, however, there is a high degree of overlap and they do not constitute discrete entities. Similar overlap is found in the rentier-landlord and cultivator-owner categories. The picture becomes hazier when we turn to caste-class configuration.

Caste and class resemble each other in certain respects and differ in others. Castes constitute the status groups or communities that can be defined in terms of ownership of property, occupation and style of life. Social honour is closely linked to ritual values in this closed system. Class positions also tend to be associated with social honour; however, they are defined more in terms of ownership or non-ownership of means of production. The classes are much more open and fluid and have scope of individual upward social mobility. In caste system, only an entire segment can move upward, and hence, the mobility is much slower.

Although there is considerable divergence between the hierarchy of caste and that of class, the top and bottom segments of the class system are largely subsumed under the caste structure. The upper castes own means of production (land in rural areas) and act as rentiers. The landless agrarian proletarian coincides with the lower castes or dalits who provide labour services for the rentier upper caste people as well as rich prosperous farmers of intermediate level. At the intermediate level, articulation of class-identities is more complex. The process of differentiation of communities dislocates class-relations from the caste-structure. If caste and class show a fair degree of overlap at the top and bottom level and in some cases appear almost co-terminus, the picture is quite ambiguous at the intermediate level of caste hierarchy. Similarly, the processes of modernisation especially urbanisation, acquisition of education and new skills act as the forces of dislocation that puncture the forces of social inertia and modify caste-rigidity.

5.7 SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

If social inequalities are so deeply entrenched, then how do they affect the developmental process and participation of deprived sections of society in a democratic polity? This key question has been answered in different ways. Kothari, while analysing the intrusions of caste into politics and politics into caste, distinguishes three stages in the progression of political modernisation after Independence. In the first stage, he says the struggle for political power was limited to the entrenched and the ascendant castes. In the second phase, competitions within these castes for power led to factionalism and in the third stage, lower castes have been mobilised and are asserting themselves in the political domain. In his words “It is not-politics that gets caste-ridden; it is the caste that gets politicised”. With the extension of franchise in the post-colonial India, each social group and sub-group got mobilised for a share in the developmental process and competed for positions in the state-bureaucracy. The Indian polity is, thus, governed both by vertical mobilisation by the dominant castes and horisontal alliances in the name of *jati* and *varna*. The political parties exacerbate the existing cleavages in a developing society like India. The salience of primordial ties of kinship, caste and community

play significant role in hindering the establishment of civil society. Moreover, there is never a set chronology of mobilisation and political modernisation, especially any pre-ordained and unconditional progression along a set path. In the rural hinterlands, cleavages of caste and community and articulation of kinship and territorial affinities work against implementation of a piece of redistributive land-reforms. The rich prosperous farmers use the existing social networks in the multi-class agrarian mobilisation in the electoral arena to mobilise and harness marginal and small farmers for their own economic interests such as lower taxes, higher prices for agricultural produce, better subsidies and cheaper credit facilities.

So, despite the egalitarian ideal of post-colonial Indian state, there are still disproportionate access to resources, power and entitlements between different social classes and castes. The relationships between the upper and lower castes in the rural areas are still governed by the ideology of caste. According to Andre Beteille, professionalisation and specialisation of modern service sector in the post-colonial Indian society has increased the role of formal education, technical skills and training; 'family' and not caste plays critical role in the social reproduction of inequality, especially in urban areas. However, it is still a debatable point whether the increasing bureaucratisation of professional activities per se enhances the chances of social mobility and equality of opportunities. Although, there may be no legal barriers to entry into new occupation, the unequal distribution of life chances, status and power on the grounds of birth determine the social and political trajectories that accord positions, ranks and power to the individuals.

The establishment of a formal democracy in itself is no guarantee that all citizens will enjoy equal access and participation in the political processes. Political privileges are retained and ingrained in many non-elective institutions, the civil bureaucracy and the police in particular. They protect the interests of the dominant proprietary classes and the upper castes. The lower castes and classes are not yet sufficiently empowered to shape and mould the political processes or the state's social and economic policies. The powerful landed magnates of upper castes in the countryside and the industrial and business classes of urban rich make use of authoritarian streak inherent in the non-elective institutions to deny genuine democratisation of polity. The apparent assertion of their rights and mobilising capacity by the backwards and scheduled castes is used by the crafty politicians to augment their power and wealth. Such mobilisations, thus serve the interests of a spoils system and a thoroughly corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy instead of articulating a programme of equitable development and social empowerment. Apart from other institutional constraints, the failure of democracy to grant substantive democratic rights and deliver the promise of redistributive justice is rooted in the class and caste-based inequalities in India. Dreze found evidence of subtle forms of deprivation in the rural areas of the Eastern U.P. in terms of accessibility of the disadvantaged groups to schooling, health services and exclusion of marginal sections of population from effective participation in the political processes.

5.8 SUMMARY

The post- colonial state in India accepted the formal principles of equality and social-justice in its governance. However, no social-entity exists in a vacuum. The functioning of our democratic polity is profoundly and unfairly influenced by the caste and class-based inequalities. The

overall balance of forces in the state especially in the non-elective institutions such as the judiciary, the police and the bureaucracy inherited from the colonial period continues to be under the domination and hegemony of the principal proprietary classes and the upper castes. The political and public spaces offer little scope for the empowerment of the poor and the lower castes. The violence against the rural poor, especially the women of lower castes and the sufferings of the people living in unhygienic conditions in sprawling slums cannot be captured by the statistical indices. While the rich and powerful garner the legal and illegal fruits of developmental process and distribution of resources by the state, the disadvantaged are victims of both the naked and subtle forms of deprivation and discrimination.

5.9 EXERCISES

1) How do you differentiate rank societies and class-societies?

2) Explain whether caste was an invention of colonial modernity or a legacy of the Indian Past.

3) How does social-inequality affect our political system and developmental policies?