
UNIT 28 SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AND DISPRIVILEGED GROUPS

Structure

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit you will be able to:

- learn about various forms of social discriminations in different parts of India,
- understand the impact of Colonial rule on the existing social system and how the changes came in it, and
- explain the growth of a new consciousness among the disprivileged groups and how did they try to change the existing social order.

28.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian society being based on caste system gave birth to different kind of social discrimination and created two broad social orders — privileged and disprivileged. In this Unit we have tried to introduce you to various forms of social discrimination and disprivileged groups in different parts of India. Social discrimination existed in India long before the beginning of the colonial rule. But the establishment of colonial rule brought changes in economic and administrative system which to a great extent influenced the existing social system in India. How and to what extent the change came in Indian social system have been discussed in this Unit. Here we have also touched upon the process of social mobility among the lower and intermediary castes and also the challenge by some disprivileged groups to the age-long Brahmanical domination in the society.

28.2 PRE-COLONIAL SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AND THE COLONIAL IMPACT

There is no doubt that social backwardness and disprivilege emanating from social discrimination predates colonialism. The hierarchical division of society with assigned ranks, functions and distinctions under the **varna** system constituted the structural framework which regulated economic and ritual relationship. Viewed from the economic angle, the **jatis** were hereditary, closed occupation groups and was probably related to efforts to eliminate competition and ensure security of employment and income. Moving up within this hierarchical structure was not completely ruled out but it was rare. Two fixed points marked the extreme ends of the hierarchical orders Brahmins on the one end and untouchables at the other. Most of the marginal groups belonged to the lower orders and were forced to live a precarious existence.

By the time colonial rule made its presence felt in the second half of the eighteenth century, the situation had become somewhat fluid, though not to the extent of eliminating social discrimination. But as India became a colonial appendage to a capitalist world economy, new economic relationships began to take shape. The policy of de-industrialisation deprived the rural artisans of their hereditary occupations and, in course of time, undermined the basis of a non-competitive and hereditary system of economic organisation at the rural level. The service castes found it difficult to get their payments in the way they got under the **jajmani** system. In its efforts to maximise the revenue collection, the company resumed various forms of rent-free tenures resulting in the impoverishment of those service groups who were dependent on them. The insistence on contract, enforced by law and law-courts, meant that those who had access to the new system could thereby manipulate its levers and consolidate their position in society. Viewed in this light, the colonial rule denied many of the subordinate social groups their means of subsistence and, in course of time relegating some of them to the degraded level of 'criminal tribes'. But at the same time, by undermining the old economic basis of social organisation colonial rule fuelled an already developing tendency towards mobility. It also indirectly rendered possible the growth of lower caste protests in future. While pliable elements among the rural elites were successfully accommodated within the framework of the British revenue system, the intransigents were rendered powerless by the destruction of forts and disbandment of local militias under British rule. In course of time the dominant groups in different parts of India consolidated their position by manipulating the institutional framework of the colonial rule.

28.3 REGIONAL VARIATIONS : SOUTH INDIA

What then was the position of subordinate groups who were subject to social discrimination? The nature of discrimination differed from region to region in the early years of the nineteenth century. In large parts of the Madras Presidency the bulk of the agricultural labourers, belonging to low caste groups, were said to have been reduced virtually to conditions of slavery. This was evident from the first major survey of the conditions of agricultural labourers undertaken by the Madras Board of Revenue (1818). The Madras Presidency was divided in three major areas. Of these, the Telugu region was relatively free from bondage system. But in the Tamil country — especially in the wet districts — and in the Malabar and Kanara region, a large portion of the labouring class lived in a state of bondage. In districts like Chingleput and Tanjore, the condition of the untouchables castes called **Pallans** or **Paraiyans** was really deplorable. Here the old Hindu institutions were reinforced by the British legal system, giving a fresh lease of life to power and influence of certain higher castes. There was a group of Brahman landowners, forbidden most types of manual labour by the rules of their caste, who were letting their lands to tenants or employing hired labourers to do the task they could not do themselves. What is interesting in all this is that what some historians call agricultural servitude was sanctioned by caste system. Likewise, in Malabar the Cherumans, corresponding to the Paraiyans in Tamilnad, were almost exclusively treated as slaves. Buchanan, in course of his travels in early years of the nineteenth century, found that in Palghat by far the greater parts of the work in the fields was performed by Cheruman slaves. They could be sold, mortgaged and rented out. From Malabar Buchanan moved to Kanara where he found an equally harrowing situation. Men of low caste occasionally sold their younger relations into slavery in discharge of debts. In short, available evidences on South India suggest that agrarian bondage was quite widespread in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Case-studies of some select subordinate groups outside the agrarian sectors show the same process of social discrimination at work. A recent survey of the Nadars of Tamilnad demonstrate that in the early nineteenth century they were counted among the most oppressed caste. They were economically differentiated between higher ranking Nadars and lowly Shanars or toddy-tappers. Various disabilities were heaped upon the Shanars. They were, of course, forbidden entry into temples. Wells were strictly forbidden to their use: they were denied the right to carry an umbrella, to wear shoes, golden ornaments, to milk cows, to walk in certain streets: and their women were forbidden to cover their breasts. Indeed, a Nadar could not even approach a Brahmin within twenty-four paces. A few Shanar families, who settled

as minorities in areas north of Tirunelveli, confronted even more humiliating conditions. They were even denied the service of barbers and washermen used by the caste Hindu of the villages. Gradually, among the main body of Shanars emerged a mobile body of traders who traded country liquor and jaggery sugar. When the Poligar Wars ended in 1801 both the trading and toddy-tapping Shanars moved on northwards to the Maravar country and settled in 'Six Nadar Towns of Ramnad'. But the locally dominant castes of the region, the Maravars, Tevars and Kallars associated them with the lowly, polluted, toddy-tapping Shanars. It is not surprising that the Nadars constituted a fertile ground for conversion to christianity. They would be in the forefront of the later day anti-Brahman movement in the region.

28.4 WESTERN INDIA

Farther up the western coastline of India there was another striking instance of institutionalised social discrimination in South Gujarat. Recorded in the early nineteenth century British records as **Halipratha**, it was a formalised system of lifelong and often hereditary attachment of the low-caste **Publas** to the Anavil Brahmans who owned the best and the largest lots of land. In some regions the attached farm servants also included a section of Kolis called **gulam** Kolis. The condition of service was not contractual. It usually began when an agricultural labourer wished to marry and found a master ready to pay for it. The debt thus incurred attached the servant to the master for life. It increased in the course of years thereby rendering repayment virtually impossible. The Halis were not sold though their service could be transferred to another master. The ritual domination of the high caste Brahmans over low caste **Dublas** was consolidated in an exploitative relationship of an all-encompassing nature. The master had the right to the labour of the servant and his wife as maid in the household.

In Maharashtra the idioms of dominance and discrimination were no less pronounced. In eighteenth century Maratha kingdom, Brahmanical dominance was backed up by the state power of the Peshwas. There was a strong connection between Maratha polity and caste system through the regular requisition of forced labour from artisans and menial castes by the authorities. In the directly administered (swarajya) regions of the eighteenth century Maratha kingdom, the state took an active role in maintaining and enforcing ritual and economic aspects of caste society. In 1784 the government formulated rules of worship at the holy places of Pandharpur which explicitly stated that the untouchables were not allowed to go near their own shrine close to the main temple. "The place is so narrow and crowded that the visitors are touched to one another and the Brahmins are opposed to this. Therefore the untouchables should perform worship from near the stone lamp (in front) of the image of Chokhmela or from a nearby untouchable hamlet. . ." In another instance the Mahars of the Konkan region demanded some Brahman priests of the place to officiate their marriage ceremony. Despite the support from the local officials this demand was turned down with a heavy hand. The state offered the untouchables to have their marriage officiated by their own priests and warned, "if they trouble the Brahmin priests in future, no good result will come out." In other words, the Maratha state power mediated caste relationship in the region and ensured the Brahmanical hegemony in society. Baji Rao II, himself a Chitpavan Brahman, distributed generous sums of money to large number of Brahman scholars in Pune, to enable them to devote their time to religious scholarship.

When the Company took over the administration after the fall of the Marathas, the state's active support of the Hindu religious values was withdrawn. This, of course, did not immediately signify any major change in the condition of the lower castes. As the Company's administration engrafted itself on the Indian society, it depended on Indian subordinates at the lower levels. The upper castes, in view of their earlier access to educational opportunities, gained a strategic mediatory position between the Company's government and the larger masses of western Indian society. This effectively buttressed their already dominant position in society. But the relatively stagnant position of the lower castes and untouchables made them fertile grounds for missionary propagation. In western India in the nineteenth century the missionaries did their utmost to persuade their audiences that the Hindu religion had deprived them, as shudras, of their real rights in matters of education and religion. There was a

preponderance of higher castes in general and Brahmans in particular in administration, far in excess of their numerical proportions in the population as a whole. "Far from breaking down inequalities in western Indian society, British rule looked as though it might reinforce them by adding to the older religious authority of Brahmans, a formidable new range of administrative and political powers." Critical observers like Jotirao Phule and his followers drew the natural inference that a rejection of the religious authority of the Brahmans and of the hierarchical values on which it was based, formed the precondition for any real change in their condition.

28.5 NORTHERN AND EASTERN INDIA

The foregoing survey of social discrimination in some selected region is not meant to suggest that elsewhere in India the condition of the lower orders of society was any better. Our purpose was to highlight some glaring instances of domination. In fact, some recent surveys of the **Chandals** in Bengal, the **Doms** in Bihar, the **Bhuinyas** in south Bihar or the **Chamars** in large parts of northern India show how these groups were subjected to similar processes of rigorous discrimination. The **Namasudras** of Bengal, earlier known as **Chandals**, formed marginal groups, relegated to the level of **Antyaja**. The barbers, washermen and sometimes even the scavengers refused their services to them. In the social feasts, they were required to sit at a distance from the rest and clear up their own dishes. It has been shown that their lowest position in the purity-pollution scale corresponded to their inferior economic status vis-à-vis men of the higher castes. The **Maghaiya doms**, like the **Lodhas** of south western Bengal, were marginalised to such an extent that they were ultimately branded as criminal tribes. The **Bhuinya** oral traditions which record the memory of their subordinates to the mostly Brahman maliks, remember their incorporation in the Hindu caste hierarchy as a ritually impure caste. They were initially treated as **Kamias** providing labour services to the high caste **Maliks** ultimately ending up as a kind of bonded labour. The **Chamars**, including **Mochis** are found in every part of India, though they are most numerous in the U P and in the bordering area of Bihar on the east and of the Punjab on the north-west. They occupied an utterly degraded position in the village life. Apart from their customary profession, they were often called upon to perform **begar** services by the landlords.

In concluding this section let us recapitulate its basic points. First, there was a very strong linkage between caste and ritually governed entitlement to resources. This obviously implied that low ritual status went together with precarious existence. Moreover, this was an existence wrapped up by multiple badges of low status. Second, while most of these practices predate colonial rule, the latter, in turn, precipitated certain changes in the position of subordinate social groups on different parts of India. Notable among these was the disintegration of the relatively non-competitive structure of the village society.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write in brief the various forms of social discrimination existed in South India?
Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) 'Politics has a positive role in the continuation of the caste domination'. Explain this statement in 100 words in the light of the caste system existed in Western India.

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- 3) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).
- i) Mobility within the caste system is not possible.
 - ii) The colonial rule by undermining the old economic basis of social organisation helped the social mobility.
 - iii) Lower status in the caste hierarchy did not deprive the lower castes from taking part in ritual ceremonies with the higher castes.
 - iv) Agrarian bondage was quite widespread in South India in the early years of the 19th century.

28.6 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN COLONIAL INDIA

Viewed in retrospect, the first century of the British rule may be termed as a period of gestation. During this period two apparently contradictory developments were taking place. Social discrimination which prevailed in myriad variety of forms in different parts of India, initially got a new lease of life. The upper caste elites consolidated their position in many different ways. After some initial reverses in some areas, they adjusted themselves with the new revenue system. They adroitly utilised the new opportunities for administrative and political power by the use of their skills. A high degree of literacy rendered them extremely useful to the new regime. Their growing familiarity with the Anglo-Indian law and the functioning of the law courts gave them advantage over their low-caste subordinates. Those who could master the language of the court of law found a new opportunity waiting for them. Finally, the early British attitude of studied non-interference in social matters of the Indians precluded the possibility of any major structural change in society through legislative and other means backed by state-power.

But during the same period a very different kind of development was taking shape which, in course of time was to undermine the ritual and social hegemony of the upper caste elites. The caste system allowed for mobility at the intermediate levels while preserving the top and bottom levels fixed. The fact that upward mobility was not entirely ruled out gave a certain strength and resilience to the system as a whole.

Interestingly, however, in course of the first century of the British rule, the bottom level also began to stir. Some of the idioms of social and ritual dominance which the lower orders had, under the weight of tradition, internalised over time, came to be seriously questioned. Initially, of course, there was predictable opposition from the dominant upper castes. But the material basis of the caste bound system of discrimination began to change. The penetration of market forces at the rural level offered some opportunities in some regions which ran contrary to the occupation-based jati system. In some regions it was even possible for members of submerged caste to emerge as zamindars, taluqdars or subinfeudated tenure holders. There was a marked tendency among many of them to "sanskritize" their behaviour. It has been pointed out that acquiring symbols of sanskritization need not be taken as meek emulation of the upper castes. It also meant the appropriation of certain symbol and

certain codes of conduct which had been the exclusive preserves of the upper castes. In some communities missionary activities opened up new possibilities of educational and consequently material advancement. In the changing perspective, the ideology of hierarchically divided society failed to carry conviction especially among the victims of social discrimination. There were indications of the emergence of a new consciousness as a result of which what had earlier been implicitly accepted as 'duty' came to be construed as 'disprivilege'.

28.7 A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS : SOME REGIONAL EXAMPLES

The articulation of this new consciousness, however is a complex phenomenon and therefore can hardly be reduced to simple formulations. Reference has already been made to the growth of sanskritizing tendencies among some caste groups. There were others who found in Christianity a means to escape from the grim realities of their precarious existence. In Travancore education and Christianity had given the Nadars hope of a release from their sufferings under the dominance of the Nair landlords. In response to pressures from the Christian Nadars and the missionaries, the government issued a proclamation in 1829, permitting native Christian women to cover their breasts in the manner of the Syrian Christians and the Mopla Muslims. This triggered off the famous "breast cloth controversy" which culminated in the Royal Proclamation of 1869.

This has been regarded as the first major movement among the depressed classes to remove the badge of servility. But regions and among the society groups where proselytisation was not quite successful, the missionary polemic against Hindu social practices informed the ideas of many of the indigenous reformers. Moreover, the humanist content in some Indian social reformers' critique of hidebound Hindu society raised the level of general social consciousness. What was historically more important though was the spirited attempt on the part of some lower caste groups to improve their position by themselves. Although most of such attempts lie beyond the time frame of this paper, some early indications may still be noted. Despite regional variations in the mode of expression and mobilisation, there were some common features. A relatively prosperous group among some of the submerged castes took the lead in regulating the social behaviour of their caste brethren. Having done that, they then began claiming higher ritual status which was generally resisted by the upper castes. It is at this stage that the ground was prepared for an imminent caste conflict. Occasionally one finds certain sects promoting caste solidarity and thereby helping the process of mobilisation. The gradual introduction of electoral politics and the census operations from the last quarter of the nineteenth century gave a distinctly political touch to the lower caste movements.

A prosperous section among the Namasudras of Bengal, comprising mainly of landowners and rich peasants, initiated the move to sanskritize their caste behaviour and asserted the claims of a higher status. This was predictably thwarted by higher castes. Undaunted by this rebuff, the Namasudra leaders displayed an attitude of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes, organised their caste brethren within the *Matua* sect and embarked on a policy of protest. Interestingly, while challenging the moral authority of the higher castes, the Namasudras were effusive in their protestations of loyalty to the Raj. In due course the Namasudra protest developed a distinctly 'separatist' overtone. In Tamilnadu, the mercantile upper stratum of Ramnad Nadars set up 'common good funds', which was used, inter alia, for the welfare of the community. They also began to sanskritize their manner of life and asserted a high kshatriya status. Towards the close of the nineteenth century they became powerful enough to challenge the ban on temple entry and in 1895 forced their way into the Sivakasi temple. This was followed by retaliatory attacks on them which was ultimately taken to the courts. Although the judgement went against the Nadars, they gained a good deal of sympathy. Moreover, through litigation and intermittent rioting a sense of communal solidarity was fostered. This solidarity was to yield good dividend in the present century. In Travancore, the low caste Iravas had long been subjected to higher caste domination. By the end of the nineteenth century there emerged a sizeable number of educated youth who were deeply satisfied with the treatment meted out to them. Influenced by Sri Narayana Guru and the SNDP

Yogam the Iravas soon made the temple entry issue a rallying point of the community. The Mahars of Maharashtra, like several others claimed Kshatriya status and demanded preferential treatment from the government. They began to organise themselves under Gopal Baba Walangkar towards the end of the nineteenth century and ultimately emerged as the core group in Ambedkar's movement.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What was the impact of the Colonial rule on Indian social system? Answer in 100 words.

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2) How did different disprivileged groups try to move up in the caste hierarchy? Answer in 100 words.

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28.8 LET US SUM UP

Thus in the beginning of the twentieth century, the caste society was on the threshold of a restless future. Although it was too early to visualise the end of social discrimination, it was probably too late to attempt to restore the older intercaste equations. In many parts of India submerged castes were smarting under multiple disabilities. But there were others in other areas who had begun to form their own identities on the basis of radical redefinitions of their own positions in the system. In the process, caste identities became the most effective rallying point in the lower caste movements for economic and political rights.

28.9 KEY WORDS

Hierarchical Division : In this Unit it is used to explain division of Indian society into various social groups which are placed into different ranks like higher, middle, lower, etc. on the basis of purity-pollution.

Jajmani System : It is a system of economic, social and ritual ties among different caste groups in a village. Under this system some castes are patrons and others are

serving castes.

Purity-Pollution : It is an abstract notion which considers certain activities, objects and occupations ritually purer, for example Vegetarianism is considered purer than non-Vegetarianism. Both these concepts are necessarily relative to each other.

Sanskritization : Adoption of social and religious practices of the upper castes by the lower castes in order to move up in caste hierarchy is called Sanskritization.

Social Mobility : Movement or changing of position of any social group in social hierarchy is called social mobility.

28.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

- 1) Your answer should focus on deplorable condition of the agricultural labourers, various social disabilities imposed on lower castes, etc. See Sec. 28.3.
- 2) You have to write in this answer that how the upper caste domination was backed by the state power, how the Maratha policy ensured the Brahmanical hegemony in the society, etc. See Sec. 28.4.
- 3) i) × ii) ✓ iii) × iv) ✓

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should highlight how the Colonial rule on one way helped the continuation of caste system and on the other provided avenues for upward social mobility, etc. See Sec. 28.6.
- 2) You have to write about the process of mobilisation by disprivileged groups along caste lines and how through socio-ritualistic reforms they tried to move up in the caste hierarchy. See Sec. 28.7.

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCKS

Kenneth W. Jones: *The New Cambridge History of India. III, I, Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India.*

S.G. Malik (ed.): *Dissent, Protest, and Reforms in Indian Civilization.*

David Kopf: *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, the Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773-1835.*

Robert L. Hardgrave: *The Nadars of Tamilnadu : The Political Culture of a Community in Change.*

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay : *Bengal: 1872-1937 Caste, Politics and Raj.*