
UNIT 6 SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE - II

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we have focussed attention on the socio-historical perspective of Indian society from the colonial period, to the contemporary period. After studying this Unit you will be able to:

- describe the nature of society during the colonial period, post colonial period and the contemporary period,
- explain the concept of caste, its structure and functioning among the various religious communities like Hindus, Muslims and Christians,
- explain the concept of caste and class in India, and
- outline the main aspects of continuity and change in Indian society.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The main aspects of Indian social structure, such as, caste and class, social problems and continuity and change in society have been broadly outlined in this Unit. The Unit carries forward the discussion we started in Unit 5. Here we will discuss the nature of society that existed in India when the British arrived. We will take note of the changes experienced during the colonial period. The social structure in post colonial India will also be discussed. A discussion on the concept of caste and class in India will also be undertaken. The influence of national movement on social ethos and thinking will also find a place.

6.2 SOCIETY IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Society in India has been historically marked by several conquests and invasions. However, prior to the British conquest, these conquests and invasions had led to a change in the political regimes only. As far as the basic economic structure of India was concerned, these political changes did not penetrate to the largely agrarian village society.

India had maintained a relatively stable, more or less, stagnant socio-economic existence for several centuries. Sociologists and social Anthropologists assign this characteristic feature

of Indian society to the self-sufficient village system which was based on:

- land possessed by the community,
- unity of village industry and agriculture,
- the village as the unit of revenue assessment, and
- village production almost exclusively for use by the village community.

This structure of society according to a leading sociologist A.R. Desai "triumphantly survived, in its main outlines for centuries all foreign invasions, military convulsions, religious upheavals and dynastic wars", in pre-British India.

The self-sufficient village society survived successfully the most violent political storms, religious upheavals, dynastic wars and military holocausts. This stubborn survival of the economic structure of pre-British society, was according to Desai, due to the fact that none of the invaders or belligerents represented a new mode of production, higher than the feudal mode on which the Indian economy was based.

The British conquest of India, therefore, brought about tremendous change in the social, economic, political and ideological framework of society. The colonial impact on the one hand destroyed the self-sufficient village economy and society, and, on the other hand, it introduced far reaching novel ideas of Western society like the concept of equality, liberalism, humanism and rationality. These ideas, absorbed by a class of intellectuals belonging to largely upper castes led to the rise of reform and revivalistic movements such as of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and so on.

6.2.1 Colonial Period

At the advent of the British who arrived in India and established the East India Company, society in India was in a state of ferment. From the death of Aurangzeb in 1706 to 1818-19 when the Maratha power was crushed and the British hegemony was recognised all over the sub-continent a period of all round decline had set in.

The British Mercantile interests were such that it ruined the indigenous industries and led to widespread impoverishment of the artisans. The political tyranny of the British became increasingly oppressive since 1757 after the battle of Plassey. The social and economic decline continued inspite of several well meaning British administrators who attempted to reform the system but were held back because of "home interest" on the one hand and because they relied on the petty European Officers and Indian agents for the execution of their policies on the other.

Also, till 1813, and more correctly till 1833, the East India Company was primarily interested in its trading activities and the profits derived from the revenue thus accrued from the territory they controlled. Another feature of Indian society which discouraged or dispirited them from introducing social reforms was the fear that they might be misunderstood by the people. The strong religious basis of Indian society and culture were alien to them and to disturb it was not in their interest.

However, for their own convenience they introduced the railway system for transport of goods, personnel, effective communication, etc. British were also responsible for introducing telegraph and postal system. But some of the leaders of the British Public who surveyed the dismal scene in India during the 19th century were conscious of their responsibilities and were concerned about its state of affairs. Therefore, we find that India was one of the main issues of debate in the British Parliament and arguments centred around the question of how to promote the social and cultural welfare of the people of India, to which British Parliament had committed under the pressure of humanists like Edmund Burke and his followers.

During the colonial period, as a measure of economic reform the Permanent Settlement of land revenue was introduced in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. It was started with the intention of recognizing the rights of the countrymen and also to create a class of Indian Zamindars, such as the landed aristocracy of England, who would support the British rule in their turn. Due to this settlement, the land which in India was never owned by individual proprietors, was not owned by individual proprietors, was not even ever the property of the King or the Feudatory became a marketable commodity. This led to various changes in the social structure of the

village community. You will learn more about this in the last sections on continuity and change in India.

6.2.2 Post Colonial Period

The freedom struggle brought about independence in 1947 when the political reign of the government passed over to Indians by the British Government. Free India continued with the parliamentary democracy introduced by the British. On 26th January, 1950 India was declared a Republic and the Constitution of India was formally adopted. The Preamble of the Constitution which provides its aims and objectives, proclaimed India to be a Sovereign Democratic Republic. Later on the terms "Socialist Secular" was also added. The constitution aimed to secure to its citizens - justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

The post colonial society was marked by an intense period of constructive changes, idealism and optimism. The Five Year Plans were adopted to bring about economic development through a socialistic pattern. Thus, mixed economy was adopted which gave emphasis to both the private sector as well as the public sector. Private Sector covered areas, such as, agriculture, some of the industries, etc. where the individual economic initiative counted. The public sector was controlled by the Indian Government. The largest and best example of Public Sector in India is the Indian Railways, some of the industries, and later even banks, came under the public sector. This was done to protect the largely poor, underdeveloped and backward people of India, who would not have been able to survive without the government support. Pro-poor efforts were made by giving subsidised food, electricity, education, etc. in order to maintain the socialistic ideal of India's leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Zamindari system was abolished after Independence in 1950 in order to remove the intermediaries from agriculture. The Land Ceiling Act was passed so that effective land distribution could take place and land could go to the tillers. However, all these land reforms made only a minor dent and people, especially of upper castes and class found ways and means to control land and thereby power in the rural areas. Community Development Programmes were also initiated in 1952 to bring about social economic changes in the rural areas. Developments in science, technology and research brought tremendous changes in agriculture. Instead of consumption alone, now farmers started growing crops for the market i.e. cash crops. This led to the commercialisation of agriculture. During the 1960's and 70's all these developments led to the "Green Revolution" in areas of Haryana, Punjab, Western U.P., Maharashtra, etc.

6.2.3 Contemporary Period

However, contemporary period which we may consider to be from 1980's onwards has seen a shift from the earlier socialistic pattern with the selective opening of market and liberalisation. There have been changes in several areas. Modern Mass Communication technologies like radio, television, satellite television, transport systems, etc. have brought Indian society close to the global society. Computer and Computer networking, fax and other electronic advances are changing the very face of not only Indian society but other societies of the world, as well.

But inspite of phenomenal change in life style, values, behaviour, etc. many of the traditional structures and values related with them persist. One major structure which emerges time and again is caste structure. It has changed a lot from its earlier form of being rooted in the concept of purity and pollution. But its main persistence lies in its relationship with kinship and marriage.

In the next section we will explain the concept of caste and class in detail.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) What was the most distinctive feature of colonial period as against the pre-colonial period?

2) Who introduced the Permanent Settlement of land revenue administration in India and when?

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6.3 CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

To understand the rural and urban social structures of India, the understanding of the concept of caste and class becomes very important. The importance of caste in determining the nature of human groups and human relationships in India is self evident when we examine the nature of Indian society. Class in India is to be understood in the historical sense as being closely related to caste. In the pre-colonial period it overlapped with caste. Due to various changes introduced by the British caste and class have emerged as "dissonant categories" i.e. the upper castes may not be upper classes as well.

6.3.1 Concept of Caste

Caste is a system of social stratification which lies at the very root of Indian social structure. By social structure, we mean the persistent pattern of social interaction existing within and among social groups. These patterns of interaction are guided by the normative system of the society.

Caste structure is thus a pattern of social behaviour in which groups and individuals are guided by prescribed set of norms, values and sanctions.

The groups and individuals occupy specific statutes within and in relation to other groups. In this system individuals are born into a certain caste and thereby occupy the associated status and take up the role in accordance with that caste identity. **Thus, caste is a closed ended social group.**

Sociologists have defined caste or 'jati' (as locally referred to) as a 'hereditary' endogamous group which is usually localised. It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. **Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally maximum commensality i.e. interdining within the caste". This definition described the ideal form of caste system. However, in real life there are innumerable variations and permutations in terms of structure and functioning of caste system.**

Being a dynamic reality which is highly flexible, it has shown tremendous variations from one region to another. In spite of all its variations found in different regions of India and its persistence in other religious communities, there are some aspects which enable us to identify it. This continuity element of caste is related to its linkage with:

- i) A 'varna' system or order which is recognised all over India. As per this model, there are four 'varnas' which literally means colour and which are associated with certain occupations. These are the **Brahmins** (priests and scholar), the **Kshatriya** (ruler and the soldier, the **Vaishya** (merchant) and the **Shudra** (peasant, labourer and servant). All the various castes and subcastes or **jatis** which approximately number about 4000 belong to these four varna. The first three varnas, i.e. **Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya** are twice born or 'divine' since the men of these castes are entitled to do the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of **Upanayana**. The **shudras** were not allowed to perform this rite. The other castes and tribal groups did not fall into this 'varna' category.

- ii) Caste structure is closely interlinked with kinship system amongst the Hindus in India. The sole reason for this relationship lies in the endogamous nature of caste system. Endogamy means marriage within one's own social group or community.

Caste is basically a closed system of stratification, since members are recruited on the basis of ascribed status. An individual becomes a member of a caste in which he or she is born and generally marries a person belonging to the same caste. Even if there is social mobility in the caste system through the process of sanskritisation, urbanisation, etc. it is only a positional change in the local caste hierarchy rather than a structural change.

Kinship system in India is largely an analysis of the internal structure of the sub-caste or *jati*. The sub-caste is the largest segment of caste and it performs nearly all the functions of caste like endogamy, social control, etc. It is these segments of the main sub-caste which form the effective functioning group within which social interaction, marriage, etc. take place.

- iii) Lastly, caste as mentioned earlier, had traditionally been associated with certain occupations. These occupations were categorised into 'clean' and 'unclean' occupations depending on the degree of pollution or purity associated with them. For example, those castes which were associated with sweeping and scavenging i.e. dealing with dead animals were considered to be 'unclean' occupations/castes. Those castes associated with learning and scholarly pursuits especially of Veda, were considered to be 'clean' castes, such as, the Brahmin. This was because learning, specially of the religious scriptures, was associated with the concept of purity.

Each caste had its own caste *panchayat* which took care of the traditional socio-cultural and territorial boundary of the caste. It had the power of excommunication or punishment like fine, etc. to keep its members in control. There was also an economic aspect of caste which linked different castes of a village or surrounding villages to each other. This link was of economic and social nature where one caste served another in a '*jajmani*' relationship or patron-client relationship.

From a purely Brahmanic or sanskrit view, it appears as if, this system was rigid and closed. However, when we examine historical data ranging back to the Vedic period we find that in reality there existed a lot of flexibility in social mobility with the gain of economic and political power. There are a number of examples from 5th century B.C. when many lower caste groups tried to acquire the status of *Kshatriyas* through usurpation of political power.

Caste system should best be understood as a dynamic reality having a degree of flexibility in terms of internal structure and functions which has adapted to the need of changing times. For example, during colonial and post colonial period we see the emergence of caste associations, such as, the *Kshatriya Mahasabha*, the *Nadar Mahasangam*, etc. which were totally modern social groups. Although these associations were based on caste and community, they functioned like model organisations aspiring to gain social, political and economic benefits for their members.

Caste system was found not only in the Hindu communities but some features of it are present in other religious communities as well. One major reason for this was that some of these religious communities have large number of 'converted' Hindus, such as, amongst the Muslims, the Christians and the Sikhs.

6.3.2 Caste in Different Communities

Some of the broad features of caste system of stratification have already been explained to you. Let us now concentrate on the specific communities and features of caste system found amongst them.

a) Caste amongst the Hindu

A Hindu is born in a *jati* (caste) and follows his/her *dharma* in this birth to improve the future birth. As you learnt earlier, Hindus are divided into four *varnas* namely, *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. These four categories are ranked from higher to lower in the order mentioned here. The *varna* system of dividing the members of the Hindu society is an ideological construct which is mentioned in the Hindu religious scriptures. As mentioned earlier, each *varna* is associated with particular occupations and the identity of all Hindus

can be placed in terms of one of the four **varnas**. Most of the basic ideas on **varna** system and its links to the concepts of **karma**, i.e. deeds done by an individual and **dharma** i.e. duties of an individual morally prescribed by religion, are generally present in the thinking of Hindus.

The life of a Hindu is considered to be divisible into four stages called **Varnashrama**, namely:

- i) **brahmacharya ashram**
- ii) **grihastha ashram**
- iii) **vanprastha ashram**
- iv) **sanyasa ashram**

It is the **dharma** of a Hindu to pass through these stages in one's life. The male members of **Brahmin, Kshatriya** and **Vaishya** varna are supposed to pass through these four different **ashrams** in their life. However, traditionally, the fourth varna, that is the **Shudra** and women were barred from the first **ashram**, that is, the **brahmacharya** ashram since learning of Vedas was denied to them. Recently, women have raised objection to this practice. At present most Hindus do not systematically go through these stages. Like the four **varnas**, the four stages of life are models. The ultimate release from the cycle of birth and rebirth comes due to one's good deeds or **karma** in life, which is by performing one's **dharma** or sacred duty as members of a caste, as a family member and so on. The final release or attainment of absolute knowledge is called '**moksha**'. **Moksha** itself is also part of a scheme of **dharma, artha, kama** and **moksha**.

b) Caste amongst the Muslims

Islam is claimed by its believers to be a religion of equality. We find that the Quran recommends the egalitarian principle but in reality there are social divisions amongst Indian Muslims. The most popularly known division among the Muslims all over the world is the division between **shias** and **sunnis**. They hold divergent views of and interpretations over Islamic texts and tradition. In India, a vast majority of Muslims are **Sunni**. Apart from these kind of divisions there are also other kinds of social groupings among Muslims in India, which reflect the influence of Hindu beliefs and practices specially those relating to caste system.

Muslims in India are divided into two major sections (i) those who claim to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants and (ii) those of indigenous origin whose ancestors were converted to Islam. The former section has often been called **Ashraf** or **Shurafa** (singular **sharif**, Arabic word meaning honourable), while the latter section does not have any specific name. In Bengal, it was designated as **Ashraf** (for clean occupational castes) and **Arzal** (for unclean castes).

1) Higher Caste (Ashraf) category of Muslim

In the Muslim social hierarchy, the descendants of immigrants from Persia, Afghanistan, Arabia and Turkistan are recognised as the highest category of Muslims in India. The Indian Muslim castes, known as **Sayyed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan** comprise this category.

Sayyeds are considered to have descended from Fatima's line. She was the daughter of the Prophet Muhammed. A direct descendants of the Prophet, **Sayyed** are accorded highest social status among the Muslims.

In the second rank of social hierarchy come the **Sheikh**. They are considered to be the descendants of early Muslim migrants of Mecca and Madina. The **Mughal** and **Pathan** subdivisions of the **Ashraf** rank third in the social hierarchy of Muslims. Both are almost equal in social status. Those who came to India with the Mughal armies and subsequently settled here, were known as the Mughal. Their main subdivisions, based on different ethnic and tribal origins are **Chagtai, Uzbek, Tajik, Tukmans** and **Qizilbash**.

The **Pathans** are descendants of those who migrated to Indian from Afghanistan or from the **Pashto** speakers of the North Western Frontier Province of Pakistan. Among the **Ashraf** groups are also included those pseudo - Ashrafs who claim descent from one of the **Ashraf** caste. Ghaus **Ansari** a leading socialist has given several examples of attempts by some groups for raising their social status through their claims to **Ashraf** descent. Ansari has given a long list of certain castes, mentioned in the 1931 census report of Uttar Pradesh. These Muslim castes have tried to raise their social status by claiming new surnames and also corresponding higher status.

2) Muslim Converts of Indian Origin

The Muslim converts of Indian origin are generally known by their caste names. In this group are placed three distinct groups, namely, converts from high caste of the Hindus, converts from clean occupational castes and converts from unclean occupational castes, such as, scavengers and people working with leather (tanners).

In the social hierarchy of the Muslims in India, converts from high castes of the Hindus are placed below the rank of **Ashraf**. Many of other Rajput sects (i.e. branches of a family) in north India have Muslim branches, eg. the **Bais, Bhatti, Bisen, Chandel, Bargujar, Chauhan, Pawar, Rathore, Tomar**. Sometimes these groups inter mix with higher ranking groups of Muslims.

By and large these converts still follow some of the Hindu practices, eg. they do not marry first cousins, either cross or parallel. Islamic law allows the marriage of near kin whereas among the Hindus of north India, prohibition regarding marriage extends to distant degrees of kinship relations both on the father's side, as well as mother's.

Unclean are those which occupy the bottom place in the Muslim social hierarchy. They are the untouchable castes of Hindus who converted to Islam and have retained their low status and poverty along with their occupation. These people do the menial tasks, including scavenging and sweeping.

Castes among the Muslims also reflect the essential features of caste system amongst the Hindus. These cultural characteristics being:

- i) endogamy
- ii) occupational specialisation
- iii) hierarchical ordering
- iv) restrictions on social intercourse and commensality.

Muslims in India use the term **zat** (equivalent of caste) to express the purity of descent. Thus, **zat** is primarily an endogamous unit of society. The households belonging to each **zat** in the village conceive of themselves as a collectivity and designate themselves as **bhaiband** or **biradari** (literally caste brotherhood). This solidarity among the members is not merely a fictional notion, but rests on demonstrable kinship linkages.

The **biradari** resembles caste in the features of its inner structure, eg. membership is determined by birth and the group boundaries are maintained through endogamy. Among the **Ashrafs**, the caste brotherhoods are subdivided again into marriage circles to provide a restricted circle in which to choose a wife, whereas the **Biradari** generally functions for all ceremonial intercourse, the marriage circles within the **Biradari** is restricted to the choosing of wives. The Muslim Rajputs are very endogamous but do not marry first cousins as **Ashrafs** do. Occupational castes like **Qasab** (butcher), **Manihar** (bangle maker) are almost strictly endogamous and generally do not marry outside their castes.

These various castes have a definite place in their local marriage is restricted within their own groups. However, there are no restrictions on interdining or concept of purity and pollution.

c) Castes among the Christians

The Christians in India, believe that when they converted from Hinduism to Christianity, they were forced to break away from their original caste group. However, their caste status is maintained by them because they are careful to behave in certain ways which are in keeping with caste defined behaviour. They maintain the traditional boundaries and distances between high and low castes, even though this is against the moral law of Christian life.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe that their ancestors were Brahmins who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, a follower and friend of Jesus Christ. St Thomas came to Kerala in 52 A.D. Syrian Christians enjoy high social status and marry amongst their own community.

Like the Hindus, Christians too have faith in horoscopes, tie the tali or marriage locket and observe death pollution and follow many of the Hindu customs and traditions.

Besides the Hindus, Muslims and Christians, other religions too have caste - like elements in them such as, Sikhism, which is a religion founded by Guru Nanak and believes in the fundamental equality of all men and women. It is against the caste system which was based on inequality. However, in practice, we find social divisions between them which are made evident in terms of marriage with in one's caste.

6.3.3 Concept of Class

Class has been defined as a kind of social group which is neither legally defined nor religiously sanctioned. It is a stratum of people occupying similar social and economic position. Wealth, education, income and occupation are some of the basic determinants of class. It is relatively open, i.e. any one who satisfies the basic criteria can become its member. There are several classes in a society, hierarchically ranked primarily in terms of wealth and income. The differences in wealth and income are expressed in terms of different life styles and consumption patterns.

6.3.4 Classes in India

Social classes are the characteristic features of industrial societies. Class in India, as we see them today had their genesis during the colonial rule. This is not to say that the class phenomenon was absent in the pre-British Indian society. The class dimension of Indian society was only less pronounced than it turned out to be during the British period.

The self-sufficiency of the village community, the building block of the Indian society, was one of the reasons behind it as mentioned at the beginning of the unit. The village community produced only what was required for the consumption needs of the village. There was hence, little surplus and as a result very little differentiation in terms of class among the village population.

Even when there was a marked class dimension, it was overshadowed by the caste component. In fact, the only sphere where class dimension showed itself rather more sharply was in the nature of interaction between the rulers and the ruled. The King and his courtiers represented a class quite distinct from the subjects over whom they ruled. The courtiers comprised the Zamindars, Jagirdars and so on. They alongwith the King lived on the revenue collected from the village community under their jurisdiction.

Besides these classes there were also classes of administrative officers of various ranks, merchants, artisans and specialists of various kinds.

The colonial rule in India proved to be a turning point in the Indian history. It introduced new elements which led to some radical changes in the structure of Indian society. Now let us examine the change and continuity in India which was brought about by the impact of the colonial rule. The colonial rule led to the changes in the class formation in India; the rise of National Movement and finally, some of the crucial social problems that India is facing today.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Define the concept of caste.

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2) Describe the characteristics of caste amongst the Muslims.

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3) Fill in the blanks:

- a) Caste is a closed system of stratification as compared with _____.
- b) The practice of marriage within one's own social group is called _____.
- c) One of the major determinants of class is _____.

6.4 CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN INDIA

Here we will first discuss the impact of colonial period on the social structure

6.4.1 Impact of Colonial Rule

The emergence of new social classes in India was the consequence of far reaching changes brought about by the British in the economic structure of India. The first change they brought about was in the area of agriculture. The British administration revolutionised the existing land revenue system. It did away with the traditional rights of the village community over the village land. Instead it created individual ownership rights in land by introducing certain measures during the 18th century, such as, the permanent settlement, the Ryotwari settlement and the Mahalwari settlement. With this land became a private property, a commodity in the market. It could be mortgaged, purchased or sold.

Till the village ownership of land existed, the village was the unit of assessment. The new land revenue system eliminated the village as the unit. It introduced the system of individual land assessment and revenue payment. Previously, revenue was fixed at a specific portion of the year's actual produce. This was replaced by a system of fixed money payment irrespective of crops. The Mughal system of revenue on crop was replaced with tax on land. The landlord or cultivator was hence forced to meet this demand. Further, the payment of revenue in cash gave way to production of cash crops in place of food crops.

A new class of land owners, was created whose interest in the land was confined to collection of rents. There were several landlords who never stayed in the village but owned land. They were called absentee landlords. A whole structure of landlords i.e. the Zamindars, tenants, subtenants and agricultural labourers existed and depended on the land. This structure varied from region to region depending on the owners, the intermediaries and tillers of the land during the colonial period.

However, with the expanding railway and transport system production for market became fairly well established. This commercialisation of agriculture, in turn, stimulated the growth of trade and commerce in India.

Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce were centred around two things - i) supply of raw materials for industries in Britain and ii) procuring British manufactured goods for consumption in India. The latter aspect had a disastrous effect on town and village handicrafts. The indigenous handicraft items could not face the competition from the British manufactured goods which were machine made and products of their industries. Thus, the indigenous village and town handicrafts got disintegrated. Artisans lost their livelihoods and some migrated to the cities, some fell back on agriculture which in turn led to mass impoverisation.

The Expanding of Railways and Roads

The expansion of railways was done with a view to meet the raw material requirements of industries in Britain. The construction of railways and roads also gave scope for investment of British Capital in India. It led to better mobility of troops for establishment of law and order. The investment of British capital found an outlet initially in such spheres as plantation (indigo, tea), cotton, jute and mining industries. This was the beginning of the industrialisation process in India. By then, there was accumulation of sufficient savings on the part of Indian traders and merchants. This served as capital and made possible the creation of industries owned by Indians in some cases.

State and Administrative System

To deal with all these aspects of Indian social reality, the British government had organised a huge and extensive state machinery to administer the conquered territory. The Civil Services, which exists even today was created by the British to deal with the task of Civil Administration. It initially had British officers but later as the number of educated Indians increased, it came to be manned by Indians. It was not possible for the British to secure staff of educated people from Britain for running such a huge administrative machinery. Therefore, they introduced Western education in India to primarily serve their own needs.

Thus, schools, colleges and universities were established to impart Western education to the Indians. As a consequence, the Indian society experienced an uneven growth of social classes.

Uneven Growth of Social Classes in India

Social forces which developed during the colonial period spread both in time and tempo unevenly giving rise to uneven growth of social classes. The reason for uneven impact of British rule was because their political power spread unevenly. For example, it was in Bengal that the two classes of Zamindars and tenants came into existence first. Again it was in Bengal and Bombāy that the first industrial enterprises started. This led to the emergence of the class of industrialists and workers in this region. It was for this reason that the British established a complex administrative system and introduced modern education first in Bengal and Bombay.

Along with the above developments, the rise of new social classes was also uneven in different communities as well. This was due to the fact that certain communities were already engaged in definite economic, social or educational vocations in pre-British period. For example, **Baniyas** were traders by vocation in our traditional social structure. Hence, they were the first to take up modern commerce, banking and industrial enterprises. Similarly, **Brahmins** were the first to take up modern education and enter professional classes. These communities took up the new challenges and entered these spheres of activity first because they already possessed the basic disposition towards these occupations. Thus, on the eve of Independence, we find that Indian social structure was made up of innumerable castes and classes. In some cases, these coincided with each other but in some they did not.

6.4.2 Rise of the Indian National Movement

In the 19th century and the early parts of the 20th century, the middle classes began to think in terms of reforming and modernising Indian society. The reformist attempts contained both religious and social components. The political movement for freedom began only at the end of the 19th century. But social reality being inter-related and complex; the rise of the new educated middle class, the reformist and revivalist movements had a very close connection with the later political movement for Independence from British rule.

The Reformist Movements

One of the early 19th century reformers was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) of Bengal who believed that Indians could become progressive if they shed the superstitious and evil practices, such as **Sati**, infanticide, etc. He advanced a new kind of religion which combined Christian teachings with **Vedanta**. He founded the **Brahmo Samaj** which was meant to be a spiritual forum, where a monotheistic, non idolatrous worship could be conducted by its members who had nothing to do with caste or superstition. Ram Mohan Roy's influence was mainly confined to urban literate groups of Bengal.

In the same century, Mahadev Govind Ranade, a jurist of Maharashtra, founded the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay. This was broadly modelled on the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal. The social reactions raised by the two movements were, however, quite different. The Brahmo Samaj by its insistence on reforms was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindus led by Radha Kant Dev and others. Here was a confrontation between tradition and modernity. By contrast, the liberal trends initiated by Prarthana Samaj, did not create a direct conflict between tradition and modernity. Unlike the members of Brahmo Samaj, its members did not lead a distinctive, anti-traditionalist life style. So, there was no sharp reaction from the society in Maharashtra. Apart from these social reform endeavours, there also existed strong movements of protests by lower caste groups against the upper caste domination. Western and South India were the strong holds of such protests. People like Jyoti Rao Govind Rao, Phule took the initiative in leading such movements.

The Revivalist Movement

Revivalist movements began as a measure of self-assertion, search for identity and revival of lost honour as perceived by its people.

The Arya Samaj launched by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) was based on an appeal to people to shed the unhealthy features of Hinduism (such as, caste orthodoxy, superstition, ritualism, etc.) and go back to the pristine purity of Vedas. It sponsored a kind of education which had both traditional and modern components. The DAV (Dayanand Anglo Vedic) Colleges, spread education in north India on a wide scale.

There was another revivalist movement which became popular during the same century. This was the Ramakrishna Mission founded by Vivekanand after his religious Guru Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. This mission had two purposes.

- First to make educated people in India realise their responsibility to the weaker sections, and take steps to remove poverty and social backwardness.
- Secondly, to propagate Indian **Vedanta** to the Westerners.

In order to achieve the first, many schools and hostels were founded in urban, rural and tribal areas to improve education and employment prospects of common people. With regard to the second, **Advaita** centres were established in many Western countries to bring about spiritual awakening among the Western people.

Movement for Independence

Towards the end of the 19th century a political movement for the attainment of Independence arose. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 by A.O. Hume and its main purpose was to establish a political forum for debates and discussions.

Most members of the Congress were drawn from urban, literate groups. Its essentially middle class character persisted from 1885 till 1918. With the coming of M.K. Gandhi on the political scene, the Congress became a mass political organisation in which primary members were drawn from urban professional groups, peasants, artisans and industrial workers.

Numerous Congress leaders and followers went to prison under the charge of sedition during the Swadeshi Movement (1905), Non-Cooperation Movement (1920 - 22) Civil Disobedience Movement (1930 - 34) and Quit India Movement (194). Several people were also executed for their participation in terrorist activities. However, the distinctive mark of the Indian struggle for Independence was its non-violent character.

The socio-religious movements indirectly contributed to political movements through education and reforms. The former type of movement induced self-confidence, while the latter type created a political consciousness. Thus, the two type of movements were complementary developments in Indian Society.

6.4.3 Independent India and its Social Problems

India acquired Independence on the historic day of 15th August, 1947 and its constitution was framed on the lines of British Constitution, except that unlike the British, Indian Constitution is written.

The initial period of self-governance was tumultuous as India was socially, politically and economically in a distraught condition. India and Pakistan had emerged as two nations. Partition had taken place; communal riots were rampant. Society was trying to gear towards a new meaningful existence.

The policy makers of independent India should be credited with initiating the following measures:

- abolition of untouchability through constitutional intervention,
- a policy of reservation for depressed castes in the government jobs and legislatures as a part of the policy of protective discrimination, and
- ensuring religious freedom and protecting the rights of various minority groups.

All these principles of social justice were guaranteed through the constitution. The efforts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Nehru and others were noteworthy in incorporating them into the constitution.

The kind of social problems that still persist in India, inspite of rapid changes and growth in its economy, technology and access to new opportunities are related to:

- i) problem of poverty - both absolute and relative; and
- ii) rise in population, despite tremendous economic development.

Poverty and rise of population are inter-related phenomenon and form a vicious circle.

Government has made several attempts through Five Year Plans; Welfare Schemes, etc. to remove poverty. Even today family planning schemes exist, although the focus is now being placed on the care of mother and child rather than control of population alone. This is being done, as research has proved a close relation between education and rise of population; and also there is a direct relationship between infant mortality and rise of population. Thus, education of women, care of mother and child is viewed as a way of controlling population.

There are some new problems also arising today as a result of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. These are the growth of slums in cities, rise of unemployment, crime in urban areas, delinquency, dowry deaths, etc.

Thus, we see that society in India has changed in many respects yet the traditional roots of caste and ethnic identities, social and political culture continue.

Check Your Progress-3

1) In what way are the castes and classes in India related with each other. Discuss in about 10 lines.

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2) Who founded the Brahmo Samaj and what were its basic ideas?

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3) Match the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. Raja Ram Mohan Roy | 1. Indian National Congress |
| B. Mahadev Govind Ranade | 2. Brahmo Samaj |
| C. A.O. Hume | 3. Arya Samaj |
| D. Dayanand Saraswati | 4. Prarthana Samaj |

6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you first learnt about the society in India from a historical perspective. You learnt about the difference between the pre-colonial India and colonial India and learnt how prior to the British the village autonomy was not disturbed inspite of different conquests, socio-religious upheavals, etc. In the post-colonial period with the emergence of the middle class, the new aspirations and opportunities for social mobility developed.

In the Section on caste and class in India we described the concept of caste; its various features and its existence in different religious communities in India. We also defined the concept of class and described the nature of classes in India.

Finally, in the Section on change and continuity in India, the impact of the British on Indian society has been outlined. We have described the rise of National Movement in India along with socio religious and political movements. The social problems related with poverty, rise of population and aspirations of its people have been touched upon in this Unit.

6.6 KEY WORDS

- Endogamy** : It is the custom of marrying within one's own social group, such as the caste group.
- Permutations** : The number of ways in which a social group, like a caste group can be arranged.
- Purity and Pollution** : It is an abstract notion which considers certain activities, objects and occupations ritually pure or polluting in the caste society. For example, vegetarianism is considered ritually purer than non-vegetarianism. Both these concepts are relative to each other.
- Twice-born** : The castes belonging to the first three Varna i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya, whose male members undergo the thread ceremony called the "Upanayana Samskara." They are called "twice-born" or "dwija" because members of these castes are considered to be blessed with both physical, as well as spiritual birth.
- Social Stratification** : It is the process of differential ranking where a society is divided in segments and these segments are hierarchially ranked.
- Protective Discrimination** : It refers to the policy of the state to safeguard and promote the interest of the backward classes of population by giving protection to them. This is expressed in state policy of reservation of seats, jobs in education, services and legislature for the scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes. The terms "affirmative action," "reverse discrimination" and "compensatory discrimination" are also used.
- Social Mobility** : The process of shifting of social position by individuals or social groups in the social hierarchy is called social mobility. It could be both upward or downward and also vertical or horizontal i.e. in case it is more from a social position to another which has equal status.

6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) The most distinctive feature of colonial period as against the pre-colonial period was that for once the self-sufficiency of the village unit was disturbed. Due to the introduction of a new kind of land revenue collection system, the British turned land into a commodity which could be bought, mortgaged or sold in the market. Also see Sub-sec. 6.2.1.
- 2) Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent settlement in the region of Bengal, United Provinces and some other regions in 1793.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Caste is a system of social stratification which is close ended where membership is restricted to those born in that social group. It is hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised and has a traditional association with an occupation. Also see Sub-sec. 6.3.1.
- 2) The various castes, both of the immigrants called Ashrafs and clean and unclean castes of Indian converts reflect the main characteristic of caste. These caste groups are ordered hierarchially, endogamous, maximum social intercourse takes place within the social group. Also see Sub-sec. 6.3.2.
- 3)
 - a. class
 - b. endogamy
 - c. wealth and income

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) In the pre-colonial period the upper castes were generally speaking also the upper classes in terms of wealth, income, power and status. After the arrival of British and the impact of their rule this overlap of caste and classes in India became comparatively less. Education, income, status became disassociated from caste position. But still, it has been found that those castes which had a traditional inclination towards an occupation, such as, learning and professions of Brahmins entered it first. Also see Section 6.4
- 2) Brahma Samaj was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1722-1833) and it tried to combine Christian teachings with Vedanta. It was against superstitious worship of idols and believed in one God. It tried to abolish sati (practice of burning the widow along with her husband's corpse), infanticide, etc.
- 3)
 - A. 2
 - B. 4
 - C. 1
 - D. 3