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## UNIT 3 RURAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this lesson is to introduce you to the different aspects of rural society in India. After having worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- Describe the organization of Indian villages;
- Describe the nature of castes and classes, and the cases of upward social mobility;
- Define jajmani system;
- Talk/write knowledgeably about the family system in rural India; and
- Analyse the nature of power in villages.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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*Village community, family and caste* are the basic components of the rural social structure and they bind the economic and social life of people in rural areas.

In order to understand this social structure, it is necessary to understand the nature of society. Each society consists of different parts, such as individuals, groups, institutions, associations, and communities. The simplest analogy one can think of at this point is that of an organism that has different components working together as a whole. Society is a system like any other system, such as the solar system, the chemical system, a mechanical system or an organic system. Of these the most suitable analogy for elaborating the concept of society is that of an organism. This is usually known as the 'organic analogy'.

You are perhaps aware that the basic unit of an organism is the cell; similarly the basic unit of a society is the individual. As cells combine, a tissue is formed. In the same way, an individual exists in relationship with other individuals. A collection of individuals is called a group, and the smallest group comprises two individuals; it is known as the *dyad*. In an organism, the tissues aggregate and the resultant entity is an organ. In the case of human society, like the individual, no group exists in isolation. The collectivity of the groups is termed the community. In an organism, the organs

combine to form the organism, which is the whole. In a similar fashion, the aggregation of several communities makes the whole called *society*.

What is *social structure*? Sociologists use the word ‘social structure’ to refer to the inter-relationship, inter-connectedness, and inter-dependence of the different parts of society. In terms of their form, all societies have the same parts. Thus, there are groups and communities in all societies, but the nature and substance of these groups and communities differ from one society to another. For instance, an Indian village is unthinkable without the caste system, while a Chinese village does not have castes. Its units are the people of different families and occupational groups. The sense of identity that the people of different groups have is also seen at the level of the people of different families and occupational groups in Chinese villages. The inter-relationship of the different units constitutes the structure of the society.

All the units of a society are supposed to be important, for each one of them makes a contribution to the functioning of society. In other words, none of them can be dispensed with. But, in each society, some of its elements are regarded as crucial, because the society is structured around them. Sociologists think that for defining an Indian village, its population, physical structure, and modes of production are definitely important. Usually, a village has less than five thousand individuals. As a physical entity, it is an aggregation of houses of mixed architecture (some of mud and thatch and some of cement) in the midst of surrounding agricultural fields—the mainstay of village life is agriculture. Of course, there may be some exceptions to the image of village that is presented here: for instance, a village may have more than ten thousand people, as is the case in Kerala. Or, the village may be a conglomeration of beautifully built cement houses inhabited by people who may predominantly be in service or may be self-employed non-agriculturalists, as is the case in a number of villages situated near towns and cities in Himachal Pradesh.

In addition to these indices, sociologists think that the social structure of an Indian village is understood best in terms of the interrelationship of different castes, as a common proposition is that the caste system has weakened in urban areas, but not in the rural areas, where even the members of non-Hindu communities, which have opposed the caste system, have continued to be treated as ‘castes’. In the section that follows, we shall discuss the caste system in detail.

**Check Your Progress I**

- Note:** a) Write your answers in the space provided.  
b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Define the term *social structure*.  
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- 2) Where do you find the most populous villages in India?  
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## 3.2 CASTE SYSTEM

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### 3.2.1 The Concept of Caste

*Caste* is the main social institution of Indian villages. Referred to as *jâti*, *jât*, *zât* or various other local terms, it is a collectivity of people, related also by the ties of kinship and marriage, which has a 'monopoly' over an occupation. It provides its specialized services and the products of its occupation to other caste groups. Harold Gould characterizes caste as a 'monopolistic guild'. The occupation on which a caste has monopoly may be very simple. It may not involve any elaborate technology and skill, and may be learnt easily without much arduous work, such as the occupation of the caste of messengers, or drumbeaters, or vegetable-peelers. But no caste will ever venture to usurp the occupation of any other caste howsoever simple and less specialized it may be.

Under the *ideology of caste*, one's merit lies in subscribing as conscientiously and diligently as possible to the duties prescribed for one's caste. The political bodies of the village strictly deal with any case of usurping the occupation of other castes. Among other things, the occupation related to it gives identity to a caste. Sometimes, the castes are also named after the corresponding occupations. For example, those who 'supply oil (*tél*)' belong to the *téli* (oil-man) caste; those who beat drums (*dhols*) are *dholis*; and those who dye (*rangnâ*) clothes belong to the *rangrez* caste. The occupations are hereditarily transmitted.

Members of a caste marry within their own caste, but usually outside their own village. In other words, the village is *exogamous*, while the caste is *endogamous*. At one time, in some upper caste communities of Bengal (such as the Rarhi Brahmins) and Gujarat (such as the Patidars), the men had the privilege of obtaining spouses from lower castes in addition to spouses from their own caste. Such a system of marriage, in which the men of upper castes marry women of lower casts allowing the lower caste women to move up the hierarchy, is known as *hypergamy* (*anuloma*). The contrary system, where women of the upper stratum marry men of the lower stratum (i.e. where women move down in the hierarchy), is called *hypogamy* (*pratiloma*).

That the classical Hindu tradition permits *hypergamy*, but not *hypogamy*, is clear from **Manusmriti**, the Hindu law book authored by a sage known as Manu. It allows a Brahmin man to have spouses from Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra castes in addition to a spouse from his own caste. Kshatriya men are permitted to have three wives: one of their own caste and the other two from Vaishya and Sudra castes respectively. A Vaishya can have two wives: one from his own caste and the other from Sudra caste. A Sudra can have only one spouse belonging to his/her own caste. Children born out of *hypergamous* marriages are legitimate but they do not have the same rights over the property of their father, as do the children from *endogamous* marriages. One of the consequences of *hypogamy* is the excommunication of the couples concerned. With the passage of time, such couples established new castes.

A person acquires the membership of his or her caste by birth, i.e. caste is *ascriptive* in nature, and theoretically, it cannot be changed, i.e. it is immutable. The chief good of a person lies in living according to the culture and duties (*dharma*) of his caste. According to this ideological system, leading a life according to the dictates and commands of one's caste not only ensures one's existence in this world, but also the world hereafter, as one will have an improvement in one's caste status in the following births. Why one is born in a particular caste is explained in terms of the deeds (*karma*) one had done in his or her previous birth. It may be noted that basically caste system is a 'system of ideas' derived from the classical tradition of Hinduism. M.N. Srinivas once wrote: 'The structural basis of Hinduism is the caste system.'

### 3.2.2 Caste in Villages

A village may be conceptualized as an aggregate of castes, each traditionally associated with an occupation. Members of a caste are generally clustered together, occupying a particular physical space in the village, which may come to be known after the name of the caste like *dhobîbârâ* (i.e. the settlement of the laundrymen), *jâton ka gudâ* (i.e. the habitation of the Jats) or *raikon rî dhânî* (i.e. the hamlet of the Raikas). Each caste has its own style of living, its own types of clothes, its own distinct pattern of houses, and mutually acceptable common grounds for existence. It also has its distinct dialect, folk deities, lore, and ceremonies. The members of a caste are spread over a region in more than one village. The members of a caste living in nearby villages have matrimonial relations among them. Each caste has its own council (*panchayat*), which is a collective body of the members of that caste living in different villages, but situated close to each other. This body takes up all disputes between the members of the caste and discusses all instances where the identity of the caste is abrogated and is in danger. Thus, for political purposes, social control and matrimony, the members of a caste in a village are dependent upon their co-caste fellows in other villages. These relations result in the unity of the members of a caste spread in different villages. M.N. Srinivas has called this type of unity 'horizontal solidarity'.

In Rajasthan, a common saying is that generally there are thirty-six castes (*chattris quam*) in a village. But, in actual fact, no village is found to have all the castes. Moreover, the total number of castes far exceeds thirty-six. Two points need to be remembered here.

First, since all the occupational and service castes are not stationed in one and the village, the members of a caste in a village depend upon the services of castes situated in other villages. In such a context, the village market (*hât*) plays a significant role, because a large number of artisan castes come to it with their specialized products. For instance, Surajit Sinha studied the weekly market at a village called Bamni in Singbhum district of Jharkhanda. He found that the average number of castes in a village of this district is about six. In these weekly markets, however, goods and services of some sixteen artisan castes are available in addition to the products handled by specialized traders of some other castes. All this substantiates the point that the Indian village was never a self-sufficient unit. In a village, different castes depend on one another for various services. Such dependency relationships (i.e. those among the various castes living in one and the same village) result in what M.N. Srinivas has called 'vertical solidarity'.

Secondly, when Indian villagers talk of 'thirty-six castes' or 'thirty-three crore Hindu gods and goddesses', what they imply is that there are 'many' and 'very many' things of which they are speaking. These numbers should not be taken literally. As for the castes, their number is not stable; it keeps on increasing over time and in some cases small castes get merged into bigger ones. As noted earlier, often in the past, sections and sub-sections of tribes moved to multi-caste villages, adopted an occupation and acquired monopoly over it, and with the passage of time came to be known as a 'caste' in their own right. Thus, all along there has been a continuum from a tribe to a caste.

### 3.2.3 Caste and Class

*Caste*, as we have seen, is the fundamental principle of social organization in the Indian village. As Louis Dumont said in his work titled *Homo Hierarchicus*, castes are arranged in a hierarchy based on the principles of *purity and impurity*, which in fact give distinctiveness to the caste system, because no other system of ranking in the world makes use of these principles. The caste occupying the highest position

is ritually the purest, and as one goes down the hierarchy, purity decreases while impurity increases. Those placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, the people who at one time were called 'untouchables' (now they are called Harijans or Dalits) are considered to be the 'permanent carriers of impurity' within the idiom of the caste system. No other social system in the world incorporates the notion of 'permanent impurity' with such rigidity as the caste system. There may be notions of 'temporary impurity' (such as, impurity incurred by menstruation, death, or birth), which is overcome with the performance of rituals, but no ritual can neutralize 'permanent impurity'.

In the caste system, the styles of living are ranked. The way in which, for instance, the Brahmins are expected to live is regarded the most superior, and those who are Brahmins by birth have to follow only this lifestyle and no other. Ranking in this system is not based on economic facts, i.e. the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. It is also not based on control over political power. Thus, both economy and polity are subordinate to the *ideology of caste*, according to which ranking is facilitated. The classification based on economic facts is called the *class* system. *Class* is an indicator of the distribution of economic inequality in the society. The term '*power stratification*', on the other hand, is used for inequality in terms of the decision-making ability, by which some, as Max Weber says, are able to impose their will on others and seek compliance from them.

Ideally, *class* and *power*, as said previously, are subordinated to *caste*. A Brahmin, even if poor, occupies the highest position in the caste hierarchy and commands unlimited respect from other castes. At one time, the Kshatriya kings wielded power, but the Brahmin priest officiated in the ritual that accorded them legitimacy to rule. The producers of economic wealth, the merchant castes (the Vaishyas) pursue different wealth generating occupations, and are placed just above those whose jobs are principally menial, i.e. 'to serve the other three upper castes', as the classical texts put it. In some parts of India, there was a clear overlapping of the three ranked orders of caste, class, and power. For instance, both André Béteille and Kathleen Gough, in their respective studies of villages Sripuram and Kumbapettai, found that the Brahmins, who numbered around four per cent of the total population of South India, owned around ninety-eight per cent of the land, which they abstained from tilling because of religious injunctions that did not allow Brahmins to touch ploughs. The Brahmins, who lived in their separate quarters called *agraharam*, were also in control of political power. Therefore, being a Brahmin also meant occupying the highest position in class and power hierarchies. This was an example of what after Robert Dahl one would call 'cumulative inequality'. In this case, social status together with economic and political power are all concentrated in one group, the Brahmins. The typical 'Brahmin villages' of South India have also been locally called *agraharavadai*.

Surely, not all the villages in India followed the pattern characteristic of villages in South India. In many other parts, the caste that controlled economic resources was certainly not of Brahmins, nor even of Kshatriyas. In Rampura, the Mysore village that M.N. Srinivas studied, the landowners were the peasants, the members of the caste called Vokkaligas. In North India, the principal landowners were and are the Jats. In such cases, economic stratification is independent of the other principles of ranking, and can in fact influence them. Thus, those who control political power may also be the landowners. In this case, different ranked orders do not overlap; they rather exist independently. For such a system, one can use the term 'dispersed inequality', for the group that occupies the highest position in one ranking system is placed lowly in the other. Keeping this in mind, many sociologists make a distinction between 'ritual status' and 'secular status' – the former emerges from the caste, which is essentially a 'ritual hierarchy', while the latter emerges from the ownership of economic and political power. When these two statuses exist independently, it is a case of *dispersed inequality*; and when they overlap, it is *cumulative inequality*.

Although myriad varieties of social change have affected social stratification in Indian villages, perhaps one will not be wrong in saying that at one time, South India generally had 'Brahmin-centred villages' whereas North India had 'non-Brahmin centred villages'. For the villages where non-Brahmin castes control economic resources, the term *pandaravadai* is used in contrast to *agraharavadai*, the 'Brahmin-centred villages'.

### 3.2.4 The *Jajmani* System

Earlier, it was observed that the various castes living in a village are interdependent because each one of them has a monopoly over an occupation. If some occupational caste is not found in the local area, then some other caste may take up its occupation, and develop specialization in it. For instance, the blacksmiths of Senapur, a village in Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh, also worked on wood because there were no carpenters in that area, and so they made and repaired agricultural implements for the landowner-peasants, the Thakurs. The interdependence between castes obtains in two ways:

- i) A caste provides its goods and services to other castes in exchange for payment in kind or cash, but this payment is done instantly, and if deferred, it is for the shortest period of time. A lot of haggling also enters this exchange. The relations here are largely contractual and impersonal. They are quite like the relations one will expect to find in cities and towns. In villages, such relations may exist between the merchant caste and the other castes. The latter buy goods and commodities from the shop of the local merchant, a man of the Vaishya caste, and pay him instantly. If instant payment is not made, the shopkeeper may advance credit, but before further merchandise is acquired, the buyer will have to settle all the previous accounts. In some cases, the merchant may charge interest for the amount on credit.
- ii) By contrast to the first type of interdependence, the second type comprises relations that are broadly supportive, group-oriented, long-term and continuing, and they involve multiple bonds between people involved in the exchange. These relations are *durable*, unlike the relations between the shopkeepers and the buyers, where after one has bought the product and paid for it, the relation comes to an end.

In villages, durable relations obtain mainly between food-producing families and the families that supply them with goods and services. These relations are called *jajmani*, the Hindi word for them as used in William H. Wiser's study of a village in Uttar Pradesh. In other parts of India, they are known by other names. For instance, in Maharashtra, they are known as *balutdari*. Notwithstanding the differences in the terms used, certain features of the system are common throughout India. Although the *jajmani* system is regarded as a characteristic of rural India, it has also been reported from urban areas. Sylvia Vatuk described the *jajmani* system that was in operation in Meerut City.

In the *jajmani* system, at the center is the family of the agriculturist (zamindar). It receives services from the families of occupational castes. One who receives services is known as *jajman*, the patron. The families that provide services are known as *kamin*, *kam karne waley*, or *kamgars* (*workers*). In other parts of India, terms such as *parjan*, *pardhan*, *balutedar*, etc., are also used for the providers of goods and services. All these words literally refer to the same people, i.e. *those who 'work' for others*, and one may call them *clients*. The implication is that those who do not 'work' (like *zamindars*, the big landowners) occupy the highest position in the secular ranking; those who 'work' for themselves, the self-employed workers, come next; and at the bottom of the system are placed those families that 'work' for others,

carrying out various menial jobs. The castes, which happen to provide services to the agriculturalists, vary from one village to another. And, not every caste in the village happens to be a part of the *jajmani* system. The simplest definition of the *jajmani* system can be: it is a patron-client relationship.

Although the *jajmani* relationship seems to be between castes, in reality, it is between particular families belonging to particular castes. It is the relationship between families that continues to exist over time. *Jajmani* ties are hereditary, i.e. various families (belonging to various castes) keep on providing their specialist services to particular agriculturist families generation after generation. The latter do not have the right to discontinue the services of the families of serving occupational castes. If they are not satisfied with the quality of the service, or they notice slackness on the part of the service-providers, they are expected to bring this matter to the attention of the council of the caste to which the erring family belongs.

These relations are not like wage-relations, which can be terminated after the transaction is over. They are durable, in the sense they continue over generations. They are exclusive, in the sense that one family will carry out its relations with only one particular family of the particular occupational caste. Because of whatever reasons, if a family is to move out of an area, it is its moral duty to find an alternative service provider for its patrons. Many sociologists have found that *jajmani* rights are also sold. The point is that no family (whether of the *jajman* or *kamin*) will move out of the relationship unless it has provided an alternative to the other.

Earlier, it was noted that there are multiple bonds between the patron and the client. The patron looks after all those families that work for him. He advances loans or gifts to them at the time of festivals and other similar occasions. He safeguards their interests and saves them from exploitation at the hands of others, i.e. the *jajmani* system is based on the *ideology of paternalism*.

The clients continue to provide services throughout the year to their patrons. At the time of the harvest, the patrons give their clients a portion of the produce, which in North Indian villages is known as *phaslana*. The *jajmani* system is an example of 'deferred payment', which is entirely different from that in the wage labour. Further, there is no bargaining on the amount of crop/produce given to a client. If the season is lean, all suffer, be he the patron or the client. And, if there is a bumper crop, then all are equally benefited. Generally, *jajmani* payments are made quietly, but there can always be situations where the patrons publicize the size of payments they are making, or the clients may show their unhappiness on receiving not-so-satisfactory payments.

Some sociologists think that the *jajmani* system is exploitative. The agricultural castes, which are invariably upper castes, seek the services of occupational castes, which are generally lower castes, without reciprocating adequately. The exploitation of lower castes continues under the garb of paternal ties. The opposite argument is that the *jajmani* system is functional. It gives security to lower castes that they will never go hungry. For the upper castes, it ensures a regular and uninterrupted supply of services. Because of these relations, the village emerges as a unified body, where the patrons organize rituals and activities that symbolically effect the unity of the village. For instance, it is believed that some deities (known as *Bhumia*, *Kshetrapal*, etc.) guard the boundaries of the village. The patrons regularly organize collective worship of these deities. The overall picture is that those who receive the largest number of services are the ones who are expected to care the most for the welfare of the village.

In the last fifty years, the *jajmani* system has undergone many significant changes. It has already been said that not every caste of the village participated in this system. In addition to the *jajmani* relation, there has always been contractual, wage-labour

type of ties between the providers of goods and services and their buyers. Further, with the rise of the backward class movements in the recent past, certain castes that were a part of the *jajmani* system have withdrawn themselves from it. The introduction of cash economy has also brought about changes, because payments in the *jajmani* system were always in kind rather than in cash. With the ever expanding commercial frontiers, new opportunities have come up in towns and cities, and many occupational castes have sought to take advantage of this situation. They move to participate in these opportunities after seeking withdrawal from the *jajmani* ties.

### 3.2.5 Social Mobility in Indian Villages

As discussed earlier, a person born into a caste is expected to live according to its lifestyle and perform duties that characterize it. Thus, being allocated by birth, one's caste cannot be changed. A person born into a caste will always belong to it as a life-long member. In his/her future births, because of good deeds, he/she may be born into a superior caste. In other words, theoretically, upward mobility is not possible within the caste system, except for women who may move up by means of *hypergamous* marriages. Similarly, downward mobility results from *hypogamous* marriages.

Economic opportunities are considerably limited in villages. Agricultural surplus is not significant either. Virtually nothing is left with the peasants after they have made the *jajmani* payments. Barring the big landlords, others in villages live rather precariously, often hand to mouth. Those, who have been able to move out to towns and cities for work, have been able to make some money, which they have invested in buying agricultural land, but the number of such families is not large. The point to be emphasized here is that class mobility was also non-existent in the village. Power hierarchy in villages depends on the control over economic resources. Therefore, those who lagged behind economically would never hope to get any significant place in political bodies. By considering the factors of caste, class, and power, one may say that the Indian village was a 'closed system', i.e. it did not provide any avenues for anyone to move up in the caste, the class, or the power hierarchy.

Undoubtedly, it is true that in villages the position of an individual is fixed once and forever. This is in sharp contrast to urban areas where the individual is mobile, and upward mobility is a cherished value. In spite of the formidable restrictions on one's mobility in the rural areas, there have been cases of the sections of lower castes moving up in the hierarchy. There are cases of individuals becoming rich after their having participated in the newer economic activities emerging in towns and cities. Mobility from villages to urban locales has always been there. Whether this mobility was triggered by rural poverty or the concentration of lucrative opportunities in urban contexts is a different question.

The first person to show that the caste system was not truly immutable and that it was not as stagnant as it was made out to be, was M.N. Srinivas. In his study of Coorgs in Karnataka, he showed that originally they were tribals. With the passage of time, they were able to find a place in the caste system, where they rose to the position of the Kshatriyas. Srinivas termed this process of upward mobility in the caste system '*sanskritization*'. It can be defined as the process of ritual mobility whereby a lower caste or a tribe (wholly or partially) emulates the customs and practices of the upper caste with an explicit intention of improving upon its own status. It envisages its eventual merger with the caste whose customs and practices it endeavours to follow.

Srinivas shows that the evidence for the existence of the process of *sanskritization* is available in the ancient as well as the medieval literature, but it became an important process of upward mobility with the advent of the British. A significant



change that occurred in the Indian society under the British regime was that land became a marketable commodity; it could be sold and acquired in the market. Earlier, it was inherited through the ties of kinship; it passed down in the family line, but could not be sold and bought.

The other change that took place was the emergence of towns in the vicinity of villages. These towns provided several opportunities, offering caste-free and class-free occupations. The only occupation that happened to be caste-free in villages was agriculture. Further, the pressure of population in villages, along with the emergence of opportunities in towns, was sending people out to towns and cities, where they participated in cash economy. Within a space of few years, they were able to earn substantial amounts of money with which they could buy agricultural land in their native villages. And, once they had attained economic power, they claimed a higher ritual status, which they would certainly achieve, provided originally they were above the *line of pollution*. There have been cases of castes below the *line of purity*, which claimed upper caste status, but could not succeed in acquiring it mainly because of their 'polluting status'. Srinivas wrote that 'Sanskritization does not help the untouchables'.

Thus, changes have occurred in the position of castes by means of *sanskritization*. It may be noted, however, that *sanskritization* was of no consequence to the upper castes, such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, for they were already *sanskritized*, i.e. they already followed what Srinivas has called '*sanskritic Hinduism*'. These castes were the first ones to opt for a Western way of life that came along with the advent of the British. Srinivas has called the process of adopting the Western lifestyles 'Westernization'.

The castes below the *line of purity* tried, from time to time, their level best to move up in the ritual hierarchy. They also had the pre-requisites for *sanskritization*, such as control over the local economic resources. But, being below the *line of purity*, they failed to establish marital and commensal (i.e. eating together) relations with the castes whose lifestyles they were trying to emulate. Once their attempts to move upwards failed, they had no option but to adopt the political path for bringing about changes in their status. In other words, their mobility was not along the 'axis of caste status', but along the 'axis of political power'. Initially for these castes, but later for all the castes, the route of politics grew in importance for purposes of upward social mobility. All the castes realized that in a democratic setup each one of them constituted a 'vote-bank', and they could exercise their pressure on the state for a better deal. Thus, the caste became 'an interest and a pressure group' and politicization, i.e. the process of adopting various political values, became a functional alternative to *sanskritization*.

Thus, *sanskritization* was meaningful only for castes lying in the middle level of the hierarchy, but then, these castes constituted the majority of them. In addition to the cases of upward ritual mobility, sociological literature also acquaints one with the cases of downward mobility in ritual hierarchy. In the study of a village in Haryana, S.K. Srivastava found that the Brahmins were gradually assimilating the lifestyles and occupational aspects of Jats, with the explicit intention of becoming one with them. This case was the converse of the process of *sanskritization*, and Srivastava termed it '*de-sanskritization*'. In Udaipur villages, S.L. Kalia found that some castes were adopting the lifestyle of the Bhils, a tribal group. This was also a case of downward ritual mobility. Kalia called this process '*tribalization*'.

To sum up, the Indian village was never a self-sufficient social or economic unit. It had relations with the outside world. Benefiting by the changes emerging in it, many people were able to find respectable places in villages. As a consequence, different units of the village were able to move up. Upper castes adopted the Western way of living and institutions. Castes below the *line of purity* had no option but to follow

the political path for ameliorating their status and conditions. Middle castes followed the process of *sanskritization*. Also, some upper castes tried to seek their identification with lower castes. In terms of these four processes (*viz sanskritization*, Westernization, politicization, and *de-sanskritization*), one may formulate a composite model of social mobility in India.

**Check Your Progress II**

- Note:** a) Write your answers in the space provided.  
b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Write briefly about the concept of *caste*.  
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- 2) What do you mean by *a class* in the context of an Indian village?  
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- 3) What do you understand by the *jajmani* system?  
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- 4) Do you think that *sanskritization* is still a relevant process of upward mobility for lower castes in contemporary rural India?  
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**3.3 FAMILIES IN RURAL INDIA**

*Family* is the cornerstone of *human society*. It is a universal social institution. Of the many functions, the most important and non-transferable function it performs is the socialization of children. Along with the changes occurring in the human society, the functions of the family have also undergone change. In traditional societies, the family performs many economic, political, and religious functions; thus, it is not a specialized entity. With the passage of time, however, these functions are transferred to other

specialized institutions. The family, which is the unit of production in simple societies, ceases to be so when the market and the other specialized institutions take over the function of production. In modern societies, the family becomes a unit of consumption.

During the course of its evolution, the family has shed many of its function in favour of other institutions, and so, it has become a truly specialized institution in modern societies. Talcott Parsons says that its first function in the contemporary American society is to carry out the task of providing basic learning to children; this is the function of 'primary socialization'. Its second function is to help in the process of stabilizing adult personalities. As the family is a primary group, resting on the sentiments of affinity, love, and concern, it combats the strains and stresses that are generated in the modern society, which is pivoted on means to ends relations.

Writing about India during the colonial times, Henry Maine stated that mainly two cultural traits characterized India: the caste system and the joint family. The latter was described as being found predominantly in villages. It was also considered an ideal – a supreme value – to which every family aspired to approximate. In many surveys, it was found that people preferred to live in joint families because of several advantages that it offered. For example, both the old and the young could be looked after well in joint families.

A joint family is defined as an aggregate of kinspersons who share a common residence, a common kitchen, a common purse including property, and a common set of religious objects. Generally, a joint family has a name, which in many cases is given/taken after the name of its founder. It has a depth of more than two generations. It is not uncommon to come across joint families that have members of four generations living together. Joint families in India are *patrilineal* (i.e., descent is traced in the male line, from father to son), *patrilocal* (i.e., all the males of the family live together, while the females born in the family move out when they get married), and *patriarchal* (i.e., men exercise authority).

The chief textbook of Hindu law, written in the twelfth century, the **Mitakshara**, has codified the most significant characteristic of the joint family. Under this code, each male is entitled to an equal share of the household property from the time of his birth. Thus, all the male members of the family have equal rights in relation to the family property. The oldest male called *karta*, however, has the exclusively right to manage it on behalf of others. One of his main duties is to see that the family property is not divided. The equal rights that all males have on the property are known as *coparcenary rights*, which constitute the prime characteristic that defines the Indian joint family.

When speaking of an extended family, one's emphasis is on the size of the family. An extended family is a conglomeration of two or more nuclear families. On the other hand, when one speaks of the joint family, one's emphasis is on the fact that all brothers/males are *coparceners*.

Although joint families are found more in the rural than in the urban areas, where most of the families happen to be nuclear, one should not conclude that all castes in a village have the tradition of joint families. It has been observed that upper castes, which are also land owners in many cases, have a higher proportion of joint families than the lower castes, the less propertied as well as the non-propertied ones, which tend to have a higher number of nuclear families. Undoubtedly, there is a direct relationship between the ownership of land and the joint family, because property remains one of the important unifying forces.

The ideal of a joint family, as an institution in which each individual surrenders his or her personal interests for the sake of the family and its unhampered continuity, is hardly ever achieved. Till the time the head of the household is alive, he can succeed in keeping all his sons together and the family property may continue undivided. After

his death, his eldest son would succeed him by the right of primogeniture, but it might become difficult for him to keep all the brothers and their wives together. Sooner or later, they would all separate, each getting an equal share of the family property, and each nuclear family, thus formed, would start its process of expansion, becoming a joint family in course of time, and then breaking up once again and so on.

This process of ‘expansion-depletion-replacement’ of the family is known as its developmental cycle. One of the suggestions that emerge from this analysis is that a family should be studied as a process, as this approach promises a better understanding of the issues at hand.

As in cities, the forces of modernization have also affected village societies, leading to both occupational differentiation and geographical mobility. Members from the same family take up different occupations. Once this occurs, it becomes extremely difficult for brothers to live together; and being in different occupations, there is bound to be inequality in their respective earnings. Such a situation does not arise when they are all working as agriculturists on the same land, as whatever is produced is for the consumption of the entire family. This system works well in situations that do not have individualism and ‘individual consciousness’ is subordinated to ‘collective consciousness’. With occupational differentiation crystallizes individualism and inequality, making it difficult for the joint family to continue undivided for years and years.

Geographical mobility fits quite well with the nuclear family. When a married son gets a job abroad or away from the village, he moves to his new locale alone, leaving behind his wife and children under the care of his joint family. When he gets a place to live, or is allotted family accommodation, he takes with him his wife and children, rather reluctantly, because it is the beginning of the disintegration of the joint family and the establishment of a nuclear family. This explains the preponderance of nuclear families in urban areas.

Lastly, it should be kept in mind that the nuclear families emerging in India because of the break up of joint families are very different from the nuclear families in the Western world, where the expression ‘nuclear family’ implies a family that is ‘structurally isolated’, i.e. a family that has no dependency relations with any other family whatsoever. Indian nuclear families are still embedded in strong kin bonds; they are not isolated as are their counterparts in the West. In India people may live in nuclear families, but they are dependent on their relatives, living in different types of families, for varieties of help.

Thus, the Indian nuclear family is not ‘structurally isolated’. If ‘structural isolation’ is the main characteristic of nuclear families, then the Indian phenomenon needs to be designated differently. Some sociologists are using the term ‘nuclear households’ to differentiate Indian nuclear families from their Western counterparts. They say that so far ‘structurally isolated’ nuclear families have not emerged in India; instead what has emerged here is a variety of ‘nuclear households’. Each one of them comprises a man, his wife and their unmarried children. And each of these units has long-term, stable, and multiple relations of interdependence with their kinspersons.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** a) Write your answers in the space provided.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of the unit.

1) Give three salient characteristics of an Indian joint family.

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- 2) Explain one of the major reasons behind the break up of the joint family in rural India.

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### 3.4 NATURE OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN RURAL INDIA

The popular image of an Indian village is that it is free from conflicts and thefts. During the course of their fieldwork, scholars have noted invariably that villagers nostalgically remember the days when they did not need to lock their houses, for each one respected the dignity and the goods of others. Consensus prevailed on almost all issues, but if disagreements cropped up, they were amicably sorted out with the intervention of the elderly. The rich parted with their excessive wealth for the welfare of the poor. In some cases, people praised their villages for having never been visited by policemen. Women were safe in all respects, and people adhered to religious values and led a god-fearing existence.

Although it is an idealized version, which of course is far being exact, there undoubtedly is a grain of truth in much of what has been and is being said about the village. In comparison with the situation in towns and cities, inter-personal conflicts are fewer in villages. The rich may not part with their wealth in favour of the poor, but they certainly display a guardian—like supportive attitude towards them. General consensus prevails with respect to the norms and values, which in any case are largely uniform and hardly contradictory, and this is one of the reasons why there are fewer cases of dissent and conflict in villages. Certainly, the hold of religion on traditional societies is greater than it is on complex societies.

The conclusion one reaches from a comparison of the idealized view of the village held by its inhabitants and the reality that exists, is that the village is not a stable, stagnant, and changeless entity.

Conflicts emerge between the members of a caste and also between different castes, and the contending parties do not always find it easy to solve them. Villagers in North India say that conflicts between different people pertain mainly to the matters of land (*zamin*), wealth (*zar*) and women (*zanani*). For reaching a solution to these conflicts, each village has a council called *panchayat*, consisting of knowledgeable and upright people, who pronounce impartial judgements, supposed to be binding on all.

In addition, as has been noted earlier, each caste has its own *panchayat*, which takes up matters it is confronted with. For the sake of distinguishing one from the other, one may call the village panchayat a *gaon panchayat*, and the caste panchayat, a *jati panchayat*. The functions of each one of them are different, for they serve different bodies. Besides resolving the conflicts between different families, a *gaon panchayat* is also entrusted with undertaking the collective tasks of the village, such as performing rituals for the welfare of the entire village, or organizing programmes pertaining to the donation of voluntary labour (*shramdana*) for building a road or a granary. A *jati panchayat* deals exclusively with the issues pertaining to the caste concerned. For example, it may further the interests of the caste or, in some literate contexts, it may publish a caste periodical.

A traditional caste council called *panch* (i.e. five) comprises a small but always an odd number of members. It listens to the cases of dispute and takes decisions democratically. The odd number of its members helps in deciding cases by the rule of majority when they do not reach a consensus. It is not necessary that a *panch* will always have just five members, as is sometimes proverbially said. The idea of *five* implies that the council is a small group and that the number of its members is always odd.

Srinivas says that in villages, it is invariably the members of one particular caste who exercise their dominance on others. To explain this phenomenon, he introduced the concept of the 'dominant caste', which is defined in terms of the following criteria:

- numerical predominance;
- control over economic resources;
- control over political power;
- high ritual status; and
- the first-ones who have taken advantage of the Western education system.

It is not necessary that all these criteria have to be met for designating a group as dominant. A dominant caste may not have numerical preponderance or it may not tilt towards Westernization. The more important criteria, it has been emphasized, are control over the factors of production and political power. In villages, the dominant caste is usually associated with agriculture. Let us refer to Jan Breman's data on peasants and migrants belonging to Surat (Gujarat). He says that in the whole district of Surat, the Kanbi Patidars occupy the highest status in the field of agriculture. They own large portions of land, and with the passage of time, they add more and more land to their already massive land holdings. Consequently, in this area, lower castes have been reduced to a marginal status. In Rajasthan, even after the land reforms, the ex-landlords (*jagirdar*) continue to own vast tracts of land and remain dominant socially. It has also been seen that the dominant castes resort to violence to keep the other castes in a state of submission.

Take an example to illustrate this. In Wangala, a village in Mysore that Scarlett Epstein had studied, in the plays that the Harijans of the village organize, the actor playing the role of a king does not sit on a proper throne but squats. The idea is that his head should not appear at a level higher than that of the dominant caste members among the audience. On one such occasion, their drama company announced that in their forthcoming production, a stage throne would be used, and the king would sit on it. There was a strong reaction to this idea. The Vokkaligas, the dominant caste of Wangala, stopped employing Harijan labourers. Eventually, the Harijans had to tender an apology and pay a fine for their assertion. Only after this expression of submission peace came to prevail. Similarly, in Madhopur in Uttar Pradesh, when the lower caste people (of Noniya caste) started donning the sacred thread, the dominant caste adopted violent methods to make them stop assimilating the traits of upper castes. The point being made is that the dominant castes do adopt methods of all descriptions in order to maintain their status unassailed.

Often, the dominant castes display uniformity in terms of their behaviour and interests. Although with the emergence of Panchayati Raj and land reforms, the nature of dominance has changed in rural India, there is no doubt that certain castes still exercise decisive dominance in villages. In many cases, the studies point out that people have become disillusioned with their traditional councils. There was a time when the council members were compared to gods (the idea of *panch parmashwar*), and it was said: 'Where there is a panchayat, there is god.' But now, people prefer to approach formal institutions (such as the courts, police, and other administrative bodies) for the settlement of their disputes.

**Check Your Progress IV**

- Note:** a) Write your answers in the space provided.  
 b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of the unit.

1) What are the different types of the traditional council (*panchayat*) found in Indian villages?

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2) Define the concept of ‘dominant caste’.

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**3.5 LET US SUM UP**

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An Indian village is composed of *endogamous* units, each following its own occupation traditionally associated with its caste, locally known as *jati*. The number of castes a village has varies from one context to another. Large villages have more castes than small villages, but no village has all the castes. Thus, the members of one village depend upon others in their neighbourhood for various services. The Indian village was never self-sufficient as some colonial officers believed. Each village has its own dominant caste, which has very high representation in the political bodies of the village. Often, the decisions they take serve their own interests. At the local level, each caste comprises a set of families, and it has been noticed that there is a close relationship between *caste* and *kinship*. Generally the upper, propertied castes usually have joint families, whilst lower, non-propertied castes have nuclear families. With changes occurring because of urbanization and modernization, the families are becoming smaller all over India, but it does not imply that joint families have disappeared.

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**3.6 KEY WORDS**

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- Ascriptive** : This term means ‘by birth’. Ascriptive status is that social position which one acquires by birth.
- Caste System** : Practised in India, it is the main traditional system of social stratification, which is ascriptive and based on the notion of mutually opposing characteristics—*pure and impure*.
- Client** : While translating the words, *jajman* and *kamin*, the terms used are ‘patron’ and ‘client’. The meaning of the word ‘client’ in this context is ‘one who provides the services of an occupation to the other caste.’ The term ‘client’ can be used interchangeably with the term ‘occupational caste’.

- Panchayat** : It is a small body of elders that takes up the cases of dispute among people, and pronounces its judgement, which the contending parties are expected to follow.
- Horizontal Solidarity:** It is the unity of the people who belong to the same caste or social stratum, but are spread across a number of neighbouring villages.
- Vertical Solidarity** : It is the unity of the people who belong to different castes or hierarchical social strata, but belong to one and the same village.

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### 3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

#### Check Your Progress I

- 1) The term 'social structure', originally coined by Herbert Spencer, refers to the inter-connections of different parts of society, such as individuals, groups, institutions, associations, organizations, communities, etc.
- 2) The most populated villages in India are found in Kerala; some of them have above ten thousand individuals

#### Check Your Progress II

- 1) *Caste* is a system of social hierarchy found in south Asia, especially India, and all those countries where Hindus have settled down, such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America, etc. In this system, the society is divided into clearly bounded units called castes, locally called *jatis*, each exercising monopoly over a particular occupation. A person becomes the member of a caste by being born into it. In other words, caste is *ascriptive*. The members of a caste share a common lifestyle – they live in houses that look alike, they dress up in a similar manner, they speak the same dialect, they repose faith in the same set of deities, they have the same set of rituals, and in a village, they are generally clustered together. Each caste is *endogamous*, i.e. each one of its members seeks its spouse from the families of its own caste that are settled in other villages. Each caste has its own political body called *panchayat*, which is entrusted with the task of amicably resolving the conflicts that surface between the members of the caste. In running the systems of production in a village, each caste is dependent upon other castes. It is because of the inter-caste dependence that a village develops bonds of social unity.
- 2) By comparison with *caste*, *class* has an economic referent. *Classes* pertain to the system of production and there are basically three *classes* that make an Indian village:
  - i) those who own the means of production (i.e. land, livestock and/or capital);
  - ii) those who lease the needed resources from the first *class* and use them on condition that in return they would pay the relevant rent or a part of their produce; and
  - iii) those who do not have any resources at their command, nor do they enter any economic arrangement to procure resources, but work as labourers to earn wages for the service they render.

The first *class* is of the owners (*malik*), the second of the tenants (*kisan*) and the third of the labourers (*mazdur*). Theoretically, *class* relations are independent of *caste*, but it has been seen that in Indian villages, there is often an overlapping between the two. Those who happen to own land also happen to be from the upper *castes*, and those who are landless labourers are from the lower *castes*.

- 3) William Wiser introduced the term *jajmani* system in his study of a village in Uttar Pradesh. It is a system of patron-client relations. At the center of the system are the agriculturist communities, which are served by various occupational castes, such as the carpenter, the barber, the laundryman, the potter, the blacksmith, etc. These occupational castes provide their services to the agriculturist caste for the entire year but are paid in kind at the time of harvest. These relations are hereditary and happen to be between families belonging to different castes. Sometimes, a family has *jajmani* ties with the entire village. For instance, the family of the village guard (*chowkidar*), who serves all the different castes of the village, receives payments in kind from only some of them, as it may not receive any payments from the *castes* below the *line of purity*.
- 4) The impact of the process of *sanskritization* as a process of upward mobility has considerably reduced because backward castes have found the political route to upward mobility far more effective in the present-day India. Mobility along the axis of status (i.e., *sanskritization*) has been replaced by mobility along the axis of power (i.e., politicization). It is so mainly because *sanskritization* has not helped the *castes* below the *line of purity* to move up the *caste* hierarchy.

### **Check Your Progress III**

- 1) The three salient characteristics of the joint family in India are:
  - i) Kinspersons belonging to the joint family share common religious beliefs, common property and a common residence.
  - ii) All the descendants of the joint family (male and female), recognized by the principle of descent, have an equal right on the family property. These rights are called coparcenary.
  - iii) The head of the household in a patrilineal family is usually the eldest male, who is called *karta*. His main job is to work towards the unity and integrity of the family. He is the manager of the property and is supposed to supervise it well and keep it together by saving it from all forces that try to break it.
- 2) Many reasons have been given to explain the break up of the joint family in India. 'Occupational differentiation', however, seems to be the strongest of them all. When members of a joint family follow the same occupation, it is easier for them to live together than when they branch out into different occupations. When in different occupations, they are also differentially placed in terms of their respective incomes. This inequality at the level of economy does not create viable conditions for different members of the household to live together and pool in their resources. Occupational differentiation is also closely connected with geographical mobility. Occupations take individuals away to different places. Obviously, in such migrations, it is the nuclear family that travels together instead of the entire joint family which goes on losing its sub-groups by and by.

### **Check Your Progress IV**

- 1) Indian villages have two types of traditional council. The first to which an individual is affiliated is the council of one's caste, called the *jati panchayat*; and the second is the council of the village, which is known as *gram/gaon panchayat*. Caste councils extend beyond the boundary of a village. They comprise members of the same caste distributed over the region in neighbouring villages. In other words, a caste council cuts across the villages in the neighbourhood. It is one of the principal factors contributing to solidarity among members of the same caste, called *horizontal solidarity*. A village council, as the name suggests, is of the village. Its jurisdiction is confined to the village concerned. It takes up matters pertaining to the village, thus contributing to the solidarity between the members of different castes living in one and the same village. This type of solidarity is called *vertical solidarity*.

- 2) It was M.N. Srinivas who introduced the concept of *dominant caste*. This term is used for the *caste* that has numerical preponderance in a village. It also exercises control over economic resources, such as land, livestock, houses, instruments and implements of production, etc., because of which it has political power. Its members constitute the best represented group in the village council. In other words, in the case of the *dominant caste*, there is a close association between economic and political factors. Also, it enjoys a high ritual status, and has often been the first to take advantage of the education system that the British introduced in India.