
UNIT 3 GENDER AND CLASS STRATIFICATION IN TRIBAL SOCIETY

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the meaning of gender and stratification;
- explain the nature of class stratification; and
- appraise these concepts in the context of tribal societies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gender and Class stratification are among the most basic divisions of human society. Tribal society too has such divisions, which may not be similar to those in the non-tribal larger communities.

Meaning of Gender

Gender is the social dimension of being male or female. Gender identity is the sense of being male or female, which most children acquire by the age of three. Gender is not being masculine or feminine. According to the Children's Health Encyclopedia, "Gender identity is a person's sense of identification with either the male or female sex, as manifested in appearance, behaviour, and other aspects of a person's life". The World Economic Forum explains that gender is not synonymous with women as it is commonly understood. It refers to both men and women, and to their status, relative to each other.

"Gender is determined socially; it is the societal meaning assigned to male and female. Each society emphasizes particular roles that each sex should play, although there is wide latitude in acceptable behaviors for each gender" (Hesse-Biber, S. and Carger, G. L., 2000, p. 91).

“Gender is used to describe those characteristics of women and men, which are socially constructed, while sex refers to those which are biologically determined. People are born female or male but learn to be girls and boys who grow into women and men. This learned behaviour makes up gender identity and determines gender roles” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 4).

“Gender is the division of people into two categories, ‘men’ and ‘women’. Through interaction with caretakers, socialization in childhood, peer pressure in adolescence, and gendered work and family roles women and men are socially constructed to be different in behavior, attitudes, and emotions. The gendered social order is based on and maintains these differences” (Borgatta, E.F. and Montgomery, R.J.V, 2000, p. 1057).

“Gender relations refer to a complex system of personal and social relations of domination and power through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access to power and material resources or are allocated status within society” (IFAD, 2000, p. 4).

Meaning of Stratification

Social inequality is a universal phenomenon in all societies. It can exist either in the form of a hierarchy of groups or individuals or it may exist without the creation of a hierarchy. In the former case it is called social hierarchy, while in the latter case it is known as social differentiation, for in almost all societies men and women are treated unequally. If social inequality manifests itself in the form of a hierarchy involving ranking of groups then it is known as social stratification, thus, social stratification is a particular case of the social inequality. Social stratification is essentially a group phenomenon. According to Ogburn and Nimkoff, the process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification. Melvin Tumin defines social stratification as an arrangement of any social group or society into a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and psychic gratification. According to Lundberg a stratified society is one marked by inequality by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being lower and higher.

According to Kingsley Davis and Moore, stratification exists in every known human society.

All social systems share certain functional prerequisites which must be met if the system is to survive and operate efficiently. One such prerequisite is role allocation and performance. This means that all roles must be filled. They will be filled by those best able to perform them. The necessary training for them is undertaken and that the roles are performed conscientiously.

According to Karl Marx, in all stratified societies there are two major social groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class derives its power from its ownership and control of the forces of production. The ruling class exploits and oppresses the subject class. As a result there is a basic conflict of interest between the two classes. The various institutions of society such as the legal and political system are instruments of ruling class domination and serve to further its interests.

3.2 GENDER STRATIFICATION IN TRIBAL SOCIETY

Tribal Customary Laws and Women

In tribal societies, women's lives are governed by their personal laws and customs.

Most of the tribal customary laws which include people's beliefs, customs, social mores, and rites since time immemorial, are not always conducive to the interests of women. Indeed, but for a few exceptions, most of the customary or personal laws, particularly those relating to property and marriage, are highly oppressive to women.

The system of inheritance among most tribes is invariably in favour of men. In general, women are entitled only to maintenance rights and expenses for marriage while men inherit land and all other movable and immovable properties. Even in societies that follow the matrilineal principle of descent and inheritance, where the woman is the focal point of the household organization, when it comes to the allocation of rights over land, a sharp distinction is maintained between 'ownership' and 'control'. While ownership of land is transmitted through women, control invariably lies with men. This is true among practically all the matrilineal groups in North-East India such as the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Lalung and Koch. Similarly, in patrilineal system, where women have access to land, they mostly enjoy usufructory rights only while proprietary and managerial rights to land are contingent on a variety of factors such as subject to their remaining unmarried, have no brothers, are widowed or marry a prescribed kin.

Several women among the Ho and Santhal tribes choose to remain unmarried in order to retain their rights to land.

In an agrarian society, land constitutes the most vital productive resource. However, women's access to it is constrained by a number of social and cultural factors. In many tribal societies, social taboos prevent women from inheriting land. For example, among the Ho and the Oraon tribes, women's access to land is constricted by the taboo which forbids them to use the plough—a practice which is rooted in the belief that if a woman use the plough, it would result in economic and social calamities. Such taboos not only help men to deny women their rights to land; by restricting them access to the tools of production, it also ensures that women cannot engage in extensive farming on their own without the help of men. This kind of taboo is prevalent among many tribes in the central and southern belts of the country. The practice not only reinforces women's dependence upon men, it also explains why women are generally confined to the less remunerative mode of production or in menial operations only.

Where women have access to land other retrograde practices are also used to dispossess them of their holdings. Among several tribes in Bihar, witch hunting is frequently resorted to as means of pressuring women who refuse to part with their land when demanded by the more influential kin. As persons convicted of witchcraft are divested of all their rights and are either exiled from the village or put to death, the practice apparently serves a viable means to discourage widows and daughters from staking their claim to land.

Women also face many constraints in their access to community land. Although in most tribal societies large tracts of land are set aside for common use by members of the community, access to them is marked by sharp inequality along class and gender lines. As land is normally allotted to the household, it is usually men who benefit from it, because as household heads, they exercise control over their wife and children. In certain instances, the customary land use pattern itself is detrimental to the interest of women. For example, among the Khasis, while in ideal terms members have only occupancy rights to community land, which is restricted to the period use only on the principle that if the land is left fallow for three consecutive years it reverts back to the community, in practice however, if a person makes permanent improvement on the land and occupies it for a sufficiently long period of time, by allowing permanent improvements on community land to accrue, occupancy rights slowly get transformed into ownership rights. A significant outcome of this process is that persons with better resources could, through the application of labour and capital, establish durable assets on community land and claim the same as their personal possession. For obvious reasons this process tilts in favour of the rich, or women who have male support to assist them in their tasks.

Tribal women also rarely have an effective role in management of community resources. As the management of the community resources is entrusted to the village council, women's marginal position in public affairs adversely affects their involvement in these matters. Even today, when women's empowerment through the reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj institutions has become a reality for most women in the rest of the country, in many tribal societies women have yet to gain access to this constitutional provision because their areas have been kept out of the application of the Panchayat Act.

In matters of marriage and divorce also the tribal customary laws are far from favourable to women. Despite the popular perception that tribal women have a greater control over their sexuality, several repressive customs such as child marriage, forced marriage and polygyny are also widely practised in many communities. For instance, among several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, women are treated as mere commodities which men could easily procure through financial settlement in the form of bride price. Indeed, the system of bride price has proved to be the bane of women, and lies at the root of the proliferation of polygynous unions as wealthy men can take on a number of wives simply by paying an agreed sum to the girl's family.

3.3 WOMEN IN TRIBAL ECONOMY AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES

There is a division of roles based on sex almost everywhere in the world in relation to the traditional economic structures. The hazardous tasks as well as those requiring physical strength have been ascribed to men, and works which needs sustained effort and endurance have been assigned to women. In India, the tribes are at different levels of economic development and in each, women have significant role. The main ones are-food gathering and hunting, shifting cultivation, cultivation of land by ploughing, and regions where the tribals work in mining and other industries.

In societies characterized by hunting and gathering, for example among the Birhor in Bihar, hunting is the job of men while collection of fruits, edible roots

and tubers is the work of women. They also cook the meals, look after the children and manage the affairs of the household. Besides hunting and gathering economy the Birhor have taken up the craft of rope making as means of subsistence, in which women play a very important role.

Among the agricultural tribes, for example the Munda, Oraon, Santhal and the Gond, women work shoulder to shoulder with men. The women exclusively look after the transplanting and harvesting besides weeding, reaping, husking and winnowing, while men do ploughing, levelling, irrigation and watching the crops. Besides this women fetch water from the distant springs, collect firewood for fuel, clean the house, cook the meals and look after children. In spite of this, tribal women suffer from certain disabilities for instance in agricultural economy, ploughing the field and thatching the roof are absolutely taboo for them. Similarly among the Toda of Nilgiris who practice pastoral economy, it is taboo for women to enter the dairies since they are considered to be impure.

In matrilineal societies, for instance among the Khasis, women are engaged in trade. They sell fish, stitch clothes in the market and supply tea and snacks in the offices etc. They also work in agricultural, both shifting and wet paddy cultivation, besides looking after the home and children.

The traditional political field of the tribals is confined to the institutions like the council of elders, village headman, village panchayat and the tribal chief, all of them males who take important decisions in all matters.

3.4 STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF INDIA

Most of the tribes in India are patrinyomic, patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal. The major ones are the Gond, Santhal, Bhil, Munda and Oraon.

When the society, is patrilineal, members trace their descent through male, normally to an original male ancestor. The property is inherited in the male line and it is always a son who succeeds his father as the head of a clan or a lineage. The authority is entirely vested in the hands of a male. In a patriarchal Kisan family, a tribe of Orissa, the daughter never get a share of their parent's property. This is true of almost all patrilineal societies though there is difference of degree. In certain South Indian Tribes like Irula, one of the major patriarchal tribes of Tamil Nadu, a daughter's right to the ancestral property of her father is recognized when there are no male lineal descendents or when she is a widow or a mother of a deceased. It is noticed however that tribal women are not totally debarred from owning any kind of property. Among most of the tribes unmarried women have absolute right over their own earnings. However they inherit movable property and the boys get all the immovable property.

The Khasis, Garo and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya and Nayars of Kerala represent a matrinyomic, matrilineal, matriarchal and matrilocal kind of social structure. Here the descent is traced through a female line, succession and inheritance also descends in the same direction while the residence in most cases is matrilocal. Among the matrilineal societies though the household

property is inherited from mother to daughters and she is the owner of property, the management of property is always vested in the hands of the male. Among the Khasis, property is managed by the wife's brother, among the Garos by the husband and his father-in-law. Thus, matrilineal social structure which by law goes in favour of tribal women is not as favourable as it seems to be.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1. What do you mean by gender?

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2. What do you understand by stratification?

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3.5 MEANING OF CLASS

The class system is a universal phenomenon denoting a category or group of persons having a definite status in society which permanently determines their relation to other groups. The social classes are de facto groups (not legally or religiously defined and sanctioned) they are relatively open not closed. Their basis is indisputably economic but they are more than economic groups. They are characteristic groups of the industrial societies which have developed since 17th century. The relative importance and definition of membership in a particular class differs greatly over time and between societies, particularly in societies that have a legal differentiation of groups of people by birth or occupation. In the well-known example of socioeconomic class, many scholars view societies as stratifying into a hierarchical system based on occupation, economic status, wealth, or income.

According to Ogburn and Nimkoff, a social class is the aggregate of persons having essentially the same social status in a given society. Marx defined class in terms of the extent to which an individual or social group has control over the means of production. In Marxist terms, a class is a group of people defined by their relationship to the means of production. Classes are seen to have their origin in the division of the social product into a necessary product and a surplus product. Marxists explain history in terms of a war of classes between those who control production and those who actually produce the goods or services in society (and also developments in technology and the like). In the Marxist view of capitalism, this is a conflict between capitalists (bourgeoisie) and wage workers (proletariat). Class antagonism is rooted in the situation that control over social production necessarily entails control over the class which produces goods — in capitalism this is the exploitation

of workers by the bourgeoisie. Marx saw class categories as defined by continuing historical processes. Classes, in Marxism, are not static entities, but are regenerated daily through the productive process. Marxism views classes as human social relationships which change over time, with historical commonality created through shared productive processes. A 17th-century farm labourer who worked for day wages shares a similar relationship to production as an average office worker of the 21st century. In this example, it is the shared structure of wage labour that makes both of these individuals “working class”. Maclver and Page defines social class as any portion of the community marked off from the rest by social status. Max Weber suggests that social classes are aggregates of individuals who have the same opportunities of acquiring goods, the same exhibited standard of living. He formulated a three component theory of stratification with social, status and party classes (or politics) as conceptually distinct elements:

- Social class is based on economic relationship to the market (owner, renter, employee, etc.) ;
- Status class has to do with non-economic qualities such as education, honour and prestige; and
- Party class refers to factors having to do with affiliations in the political domain.

According to Weber, a more complex division of labour made the class more heterogeneous. In contrast to simple income—property hierarchies, and to structural class schemes like Weber’s or Marx’s, there are theories of class based on other distinctions, such as culture or educational attainment. At times, social class can be related to elitism and those in the higher class are usually known as the “social elite”. For example, Bourdieu seems to have a notion of high and low classes comparable to that of Marxism, insofar as their conditions are defined by different habitus, which is in turn defined by different objectively classifiable conditions of existence. In fact, one of the principal distinctions Bourdieu makes is a distinction between bourgeoisie taste and the working class taste. Social class is a segment of society with all the members of all ages and both the sexes who share the same general status. Maclver says whenever social intercourse is limited by the consideration of social status by distinctions between higher and lower there exists a social class.

A social class is essentially a status group. Class is related to status. Different statuses arise in a society as people do different things, engage in different activities and pursue different vocations. Status in the case of class system is achieved and not ascribed. Birth is not the criterion of status. Achievements of an individual mostly decide his status. Class is almost an universal phenomenon. It occurs in all the modern complex societies of the world. Each social class has its own status in the society. Status is associated with prestige. The relative position of the class in the social set up arises from the degree of prestige attached to the status. A social class is relatively a stable group. A social class is distinguished from other classes by its customary modes of behaviour. This is often referred to as the life-styles of a particular class. It includes mode dress, kind of living, the means of recreation and cultural products one is able to enjoy, the relationship between parent and children. Life-styles reflect the specialty in preferences, tastes and values of a class. Social classes are open- groups. They represent an open social system. An

open class system is one in which vertical social mobility is possible. The basis of social classes is mostly economic but they are not mere economic groups or divisions. Subjective criteria such as class-consciousness, class solidarity and class identification on the one hand and the objective criteria such as wealth, property, income, education and occupation on the other hand are equally important in the class system. Class system is associated with class consciousness. It is a sentiment that characterizes the relations of men towards the members of their own and other classes. It consists in the realization of a similarity of attitude and behavior with members of other classes.

Classification of Classes

Sociologists have given three-fold classification of classes which consists of - upper class, middle class and lower class. Sorokin has spoken of three major types of class stratification -they are economic, political and occupational classes. Lloyd Warner shows how class distinctions contribute to social stability. Veblen analyzed the consumption pattern of the rich class by the concept of conspicuous consumption. Warner has classified classes into six types- upper-upper class, upper-middle class, upper-lower class, lower-upper class, the lower middle class and lower class. Anthony Giddens's three class model is the upper, middle and lower (working) class.

3.6 CLASS STRATIFICATION IN TRIBAL SOCIETY

Dr Verrier Elwin divides the tribes in India into four classes according to their stage of cultural development.

Class I is the purest of the pure tribal groups comprising about two or three million persons. This class of tribal group maintains their traditions and tribal organization. Geographical conditions have largely protected them from debasing contacts of the plains.

Class II –This group though retaining their tribal mode of life exhibits the following characteristics in contrast to the first group:

- a) Instead of a communal life, this group lives a village life which has become individualistic. Their communal life and traditions are only preserved through their village dormitories.
- b) In contrast to class I tribes, the members of those of class II do not share things with one another.
- c) Axe cultivation has ceased to be a way of life for them.
- d) The members of these tribes are more contaminated by the life outside. They come in contact with groups living on the periphery, who live a more complex, viz., civilized life, and
- e) The members of these tribes are less simple and less honest than the members of the tribes belonging to Class 1.

Class III-The tribes belonging to class III constitutes the largest section of the total tribal population. Members of this class of tribal groups are in a peculiar state of transition. These tribes have been exposed to the influences of economic and socio-cultural factors. A large section of this population was reduced to the status of bond slaves or serfs of money lenders, zamindars and contractors

who entered Indian society as a result of the political and economic policies pursued by the British. Another section was reduced to the category of near slave labourers working on plantations, in mines, on railway and road constructions and other enterprises.

The Class IV tribals (a very small minority) consist of the old aristocracy of the country, represented today by great Bhil and Naga chieftans, the Gond Rajas, a few Binishvar and Bhuyia landlords, Korku nonlemen, wealthy Santhal and Uraon leaders and some highly cultured Mundas. They retain the old tribal names and their clan and totem rules and observe elements of tribal religion though they generally adopt the full Hindu faith and live in modern and even European style. According to Elwin, tribals of this class have won the battle of culture contacts. It means they have acquired aristocratic traditions, economic stability, affluence, outside encouragement, a certain arrogance and self confidence characteristic alike of ancient families and modern enterprise.

Ghurye has divided the tribes into three classes:

First, such sections of them as Raj Gonds and others who have successfully fought the battle and are recognized as members of fairly high status within Hindu society.

Secondly, the large mass that has been partially Hinduized and has come in closer contact with Hindus.

Thirdly, the hill sections which have exhibited the greatest power of resistance to the alien cultures that have pressed upon their border.

The study of the classification of the tribal population has also indicated another fact, that even among the tribal population, a peculiar type of stratification has been progressing. On the one hand, a small privileged, property owning, educated section has been emerging; on the other hand, the vast bulk of the tribals are being hurled into the ranks of the lowest toiling, exploited classes of contemporary Indian society. This stratification has crucial significance. The 'vocal', 'richer', 'privileged minority' will inevitably utilise the benefits bestowed on the tribals in the form of special concessions in their game for power. They will launch programmes and movements in the name of the entire tribal people, which in reality serve only their own interests.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1. What do you understand by Class?

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2. How does Verrier Elwin classify tribes?

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed the meaning of gender, class and stratification. We have seen how gender stratification takes place in tribal societies and how class stratification exists among tribal society. Though it may seem that among tribals, there is no stratification and their society is egalitarian, class stratification exists among the tribals. Women's status in tribal society is low. Tribal society is patriarchal and women do not enjoy prominent position in the social and religious spheres.

3.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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