

### **Rural Class System in India: The Changing Patterns!**

There is much controversy at conceptual level on the structures of caste and class. It is argued by some social scientists that caste and class are not polar opposites. There is a continuum between the two. Yet another argument often given is that there is a class in a caste. The Brahmin is a caste, but there are classes of Brahmins poor and rich in the Brahmin caste. Recently, a new controversy is raised by Dipankar Gupta, K.L. Sharma and other sociologists.

We do not want to elaborate this controversy but would only say that despite differences in the comprehension of caste and class the fact remains that the Indian society shall have to face for some time to come, social problems relating the caste system.

Dipankar Gupta, while raising the controversy between caste and class, puts these two strata of society in the field of culture and Marxism. If we look at caste as an aspect of culture, it is a primordial form of Indian society and is a part of India's rural-urban stratification. From the point of view of Marxism it is a mode of production. Louis Dumont is the chief architect of the caste as a form of culture.

We, however, do not want to enter into this controversy of caste as a form of culture or a mode of production. We only wish to argue that class is not essentially an urban phenomenon, nor the caste is restricted to rural society. Both caste and class as forms of stratification are found in rural society.

### **Changing Class System in Rural Society:**

Whenever social scientists and political and social workers including the agricultural workers discuss about rural class system, a question is raised: Is a transition taking place in the rural social structure of India from caste to class? In other words, the basic point of enquiry today is to find out whether caste is changing and taking the form of a class. The question is important. It has taken a form of debate in rural sociology.

On one side of the debate is Andre Beteille who has argued in his article on 'Class Structure in an Agrarian Society' says that the Jotedars of West Bengal, as an agricultural caste, are moving towards the formation of a class. But the change from caste to class is amorphous.

By amorphousness Beteille means that the form of class which is emerging among the Jotedars is not of any definite shape or structure of a class. The movement from caste to class is not clear; it is much doubtful. Beteille observes:

It is frequently argued that in countries like India, the older system of inequalities based on caste is being replaced by a class system not only in the cities but also in the rural areas. If caste stands for a system of inequality in which groups are sharply differentiated and at the same time organically related, then clearly there is evidence of the decline of caste.

If, on the other hand, class stands for a system of antagonistic groups based on the polarisation of consciously organised interests, there is no general evidence that this kind of structure is emerging throughout the country: the predominant impression is one of amorphousness rather than structure.

In the above statement Beteille is quite clear when he makes his observation. First, if caste is defined as a form of structural inequality then it has died. Second, if the meaning of class is taken as an antagonistic group then it is not taking a definite shape of a class in village India.

Beteille, thus, is very clear that caste is declining in India's villages; he is also certain that class is replacing caste but the form of class which is emerging has not taken a proper shape of class, if we define it correctly. On the other side of the debate is Pauline Kolenda who has taken a position that village caste system is changing to village class system. To substantiate her position Kolenda refers to her study of fire hamlets in Kanya Kumari district of Tamilnadu.

**She deals with four questions:**

- (1) What are the trends of land transfer?
- (2) What are the factors contributing to these changes?
- (3) What is the impact of these land transfers on social structure?
- (4) How to conceptualise these changes?

The data generated by Kolenda reveal that there are a variety of ways through which people lose their land. Some lose it by investing in business that failed. Such castes sold their land to pay the debt. Land is also lost for contesting elections.

Some had to dispose of their land to pay for household expenses. Kolenda notes that "Brahmins and Vellalas have been the main losers of land while Thevars, Kallars and Nadars have become the new landowners. Given the stagnant nature of the economy—there has been no green revolution in the area—the rural folk spend their money in the town on education, cinema, medical care and bus travel. The urban folk invest their money in village land. Thus, the earnings of countrymen enrich townsmen who then buy up the land".

Kolenda's findings of Kanya Kumari district very clearly explain that in rural India the caste as a system does not operate. Its place has been taken by class.

**Kolenda says:**

In neither rural nor urban areas does the old self-sufficient caste system operate, but castes persist as residential locations and as organized communities in the rural area. Kolenda, in categorical words, observes that in rural India middle class is definitely emerging in place of caste system. The existence of caste is only observable in the habitation pattern of the villages. So far as the agricultural operations are concerned the caste has decayed in rural society.

Kolenda's position in the debate on caste to class is very clear. She says that caste is replaced by class. And the class which is emerging is not a rich class, but a middle class. She further states that the village class system does not enrich a man to become a rich class because there are opportunities outside the village to amass money. She observes:

Success, in other words, takes place very largely outside of the villages; sons who manage to get jobs at salaries which provide some surplus by land. In the Kanya Kumari area, it is professionals, especially medical doctors and others who have done well in business in town, who are buying land.

Whether they will become commercial farmers is yet to be seen...We thus, have the picture of a society which continues to operate in terms of caste communities if not in terms of a caste system in the rural areas, and which operates increasingly in terms of middle-classmen with modern occupations in towns and cities.

In the preceding section we have discussed the caste. Class controversy as is going on in social sciences. The replacement of caste by the form of class in rural India seems to be a certainty. The question now is: What factors are responsible for the transformation of caste into class in rural India?

**Factors of Transformation of Caste into Class in Rural Society:****(1) Government policy:**

Jan Breman who has experience of working in Bardoli taluka of Surat district informs that it has always been the policy of government to pauperise the agricultural labour. The green revolution, white revolution, irrigation and electric supply have gone mostly in favour of the big farmers.

In fact, the benefits of development programmes have been largely cornered by the big landowners. It is due to the government policy that agricultural capitalism has come to stay in Gujarat. Not only that Breman goes to the extent of saying that the nationalist movement before independence and the heading political parties have also promoted agricultural capitalism.

**He observes:**

The advance of a capitalist mode of agricultural production has in essence been pushed through by a class of large and middle farmers, originating from intermediate castes who have gradually gained dominance in recent decades, with the support of the nationalist movement before the coming of independence, and of the coalitions of leading parties since then. The working classes have derived much less profit from the extension of employment which has accompanied this transformation.

Pauline Kolenda and Jan Breman both agree that in the southern and western parts of India the intermediate castes have become middle classes. And, in this process of social formation, the rural castes are changing into middle class; this kind of social formation is mainly due to the role of state and the policy of rural development. In fact, the government intervention in the rural society has been in favour of principal landowners.

**(2) Correlation between caste and class:**

Rural caste and class have been analysed from both Weberian and Marxian perspectives. But if one tries to apply only Marxian perspective to understand the class structure, he cannot do so successfully. Caste and class are a mixed phenomenon in India's rural society.

Gail Omvedt argues that there are feudal forces in caste and as a result of it the former landlords, zamindars and jagirdars have come out as capitalist peasants. It means that the former higher castes have become today higher classes.

Where Breman and Kolenda observe that intermediate classes have become classes, Omvedt comes to the conclusion that former higher castes have become higher classes. Despite this difference in findings which is of degree, the fact remains that rural castes are definitely transforming into classes. Another difference is that Omvedt considers caste as a feudal organisation and its change into class is capitalistic.

**(3) Dominant castes replaced:**

It was in sixties that M.N. Srinivas gave the concept of dominant caste. But, it has lost much of its relevance today. The big landowners, who have migrated to urban and industrial communities, have taken to new sources of income or have been deprived of land due to ceiling legislations.

Their dominance in the village has been weakened by several forces. K.L. Sharma presents a new set of data to contest the influence of dominant caste in rural society. He says that the power wielded by the former elites such as zamindars and jagirdars has decayed because of the abolition of feudal system.

On the other hand, members of the weaker sections have got new power from democratic institutions. The new empowerment of weaker sections has brought these sections in close competition with the former power elites. The empirical reality is that the dominant castes

have now been deprived by their traditional power of ruling over the village or maintaining the ongoing of the rural system. The dominant castes thus are replaced by new power elites.

K.L. Sharma very emphatically explains the decay of dominant caste in rural society.

**He writes:**

The idea of 'dominant caste' or group dominance is based on certain assumptions, and since these are not found valid, group dominance tends to be a myth rather than a reality. The new power welders are not the same as they were in the past; however, qualitative difference between the old and the new power elites has been much.

The basic difference between the two lays in the fact that rank of a 'group' as a determinant of elite position has withered away. Today, elites are an aggregation and not an active functioning primordial group as the members lack group homogeneity, equality or status and rank, and equal distribution of power and prestige.

**(4) Caste, land and politics make class:**

Caste is not only a system of hierarchy; it is also related to land and politics. Viewed from this perspective, the idea of a class is also inherent in a caste. Land involves an interaction between the landowner and the actual cultivator.

The power is also inherent to the caste. In the changing scene, therefore, when we analyse caste, we must take into consideration the relationship of caste hierarchy, the notion of purity and pollution in relation to land owned by a particular caste and its power structure.

When the land and power undergo change, resultantly the caste structure also witnesses certain changes and these changes relate to class. In the contemporary politics of competing demands of each caste group, naturally the caste, assumes the role of a class. Thus, political and economic considerations turn a caste into a class.

**K.L. Sharma very rightly observes:**

Thus, both caste and class are resources for gaining access to political power. Once political power is gained, it proves to be a further resource for the consolidation and improvement of status and class positions. This is how the relationship between land, caste and politics is found in Indian villages today.

When a caste becomes a class, the class conflict which emerges is basically caste war. In Bihar, for instance, the class war that, we find between the big landowners and the agricultural labourers are basically and inherently a caste war.

Francine Frankel and Zoya Hasan strike criticism of this kind of conflict in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh respectively. In these states "the middle peasants in particular lured the marginal

farmers and agricultural labourers on their side preventing them to act on class lines by arousing caste loyalty as most of them belonged to the castes of the middle peasants.”

Yet another example of caste becoming a strong class system is that of Karnataka and Tamilnadu. In both these states the caste has been a strong factor of cohesive divisions in society. But the political mobilisations have made the rural society highly class-oriented. There have emerged village factions based on class consideration. This has been referred by D.A. Washbrook in Tamilnadu and James Manor in Karnataka.

In the case of Kerala it is found that there has been enough mobilisation in power politics in terms of caste and class. In fact, despite a lack of uniformity in the pattern of caste, class and dominance in the south Indian states, it is different from the north Indian socio-political system obviously due to historical and structural reasons.

In the state of Rajasthan there has been a caste dynamics which has taken the form of a class conflict. The Rajputs have an alliance with the Banias and Jains and have pushed back the Brahmins to a state of oblivion. This has been reported by Iqbal Narain and P.C. Mathur. Ghanshyam Shah also finds similar situation in Gujarat.

#### **(5) Capitalist mode of production: Turned caste into class:**

Admittedly, the agricultural production in rural India has increased tremendously during the last fifty years. Green revolution has come. Green revolution means use of chemical fertilisers and high yielding varieties in farm production. Actually, green revolution coupled with the introduction of new technology have revolutionised the mode of production in agriculture.

Advanced technology, new yielding varieties and chemical manure can be fruitfully employed by only big farmers who have capacity to invest in agricultural production. This innovation in agriculture has changed the total mode of production resulting in the emergence of capitalism in agriculture. This form of capitalism has changed the rural caste system into rural class system. Analysing the shift from caste to class in agrarian society, K.L. Sharma very rightly observes:

The capitalistic mode of production in agriculture has not only polarised the rural class structure further in terms of the rich and the poor, the dominant and the weak, the upper and the lower segments of society, their relationship with the state is also being redefined in favour of the beneficiaries of the state's policies and programme.

#### **(6) Some new emerging agricultural classes in rural India:**

We have argued in the- preceding pages about the social formations which have transformed the caste into class. Such a process has been enquired into by a large number of rural sociologists and sociologists. Notwithstanding this, some of the social scientists who have

worked exclusively on agricultural classes have brought out a new classification of agricultural castes.

These classes do not interview in the caste structure of rural society. The castes work independently in the villages. In the field of agricultural production or in peasantry as a whole there are some classes. These classes are agricultural classes. In other words, landholdings have never been even in rural India. Differences in the size of land have created diverse agricultural classes in rural society.

**A broad classification of agricultural classes is given below:**

(1) Big farmers,

(2) Small farmers,

(3) Marginal farmers, and

(4) Landless labourers. But such a kind of classification of peasants in terms of class categories does not imply that the institution of caste is transforming into class. Caste-class transformation is different from the classes of peasantry in general. We have mentioned it here because the classes in peasantry in one way or the other also affect the functioning of caste- classes.