

Agrarian Societies and Rural Development: A Sociological Review

*Dr.Jyothi.D.B. Assistant Professor of Sociology, G V P P Government First Grade College, Hagaribommanahalli

Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **agrarian society**, or agricultural society, a community whose economy is based on producing and maintaining crops and farmland can be enabled to further **Rural Development**. The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power. If the production in peasant societies is simple and small, one might ask the question does peasantry form a class? In India, peasantry has always been a part of broad historical processes. Their position in the organisation of production has altered tremendously in these historical processes. Hence, in examining the agrarian class relations in India, we should begin with the nature of organisation of production in agriculture and the broad historical processes that have affected the organisation of production in Indian agriculture. One can delineate at least three distinct approaches to the definition of agrarian classes. The first approach focus on categories indigenous to the society being studied. While the appeal to the indigenous categories derives its strength from the assumption that they are indeed “the categories in terms of which he (the villager) thinks and acts”, the problem arises because of the ideological nature of the people’s images of their society which often distort the underlying structure of their relations. In the distributional approach people are assigned to different classes depending on the association between people and things and on the basis of quantitative differences in the distribution of things. Since classification remains arbitrary and ad hoc in this approach it does not contain within itself any explicit directives for the historical analysis of class dynamics.

Structural studies on the other hand focus on relations between different groups of people i.e., on social relations, particularly as these relations are themselves related to differential control of the means of production. Along with landed property, labour contribution is the other basic feature that Structuralist use to differentiate agrarian classes. Their theoretical orientation also assumes that major classes are opposed to one another in a relationship of conflict. In empirical terms class can be conceptualized according to self-employment along with the criteria of possession of means of production and economic viability. On the basis of such criteria generally five classes, viz., landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant and agricultural labourers are proposed. Generally agrarian classes are understood in the context of these approaches, but not sticking to a particular approach for analytical purposes.

Key words: rural development, agriculture, modern world, Demographics, Agrarianism

Introduction

on the eve of Independence the agrarian society emerged as an extremely poverty-ridden, stratified and disintegrated sector. It was reeling under the social and economic bondages. Hence, the agrarian society was characterised by extreme inequality, subinfeudation in the landholding, high concentration of the land in the hands of rural rich, landlessness and land hunger of the peasants, racketing and tenurial insecurity of the tenants and small peasants; destruction of the traditional village and collage industries, penetration of market and money economy in backward agriculture. Besides there were the subsurface tensions of conflict of interest between the agrarian classes which were manifested in the peasant movements and large-scale participation of the peasantry in the national movement. After Independence, restructuring the rural economy was a must for putting it on the path of progress and accelerated development. Comprehensive **land reform** and **rural development programmes** have been introduced. The abolition of zamindari system took away the powers of the zamindars.

The rural society in India experienced a phenomenal change in the mid-sixties with the adoption of a new strategy of agricultural development, which is widely known as the **Green Revolution**. These helped generate substantial growth in the agrarian economy along with significant improvement in the structural arrangement of organisation of production in many parts of the country. After liberalization in 1991, the **New Agricultural Policy, 2000** aims at bringing major changes in the agrarian economy through private participation, technological upgradation and transformation of agriculture into an industry.

Changing Class Structure in Agriculture

While writing in the 1950s Daniel Thomer noted : “Some parts of India, as for example Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Bihar, have to this day large absentee landlords, whose holdings are let out to tenants. In Bengal there are known to be several layers of tenants and subtenants between the zamindars and the men who actually till the soil. The former princely states still contain a great variety of jagirdars, inamdars, and other holders of large estates under especially privileged tenures. He described India as having a ‘unique agrarian structure’ which represented a blending of remanants from the pre-British economic order together with the modern western concepts of private property.

Agrarian reforms and rural development strategies like green revolution^[4], which aimed at bringing economic development with social justice in its agrarian society, in turn brought regional disparities and sharp inequalities among the agrarian people. Thus the process of class formation has not been a uniform one all over the country. Examining the emerging class inequalities in the rural society, scholars have identified various agrarian classes. To **Kotovaky**, in the stratified rural social structure in India there have been the bourgeoisie landowners, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. **Daniel Thorner (1973)** referring to agrarian classes after independence has talked of three main classes: malik, Kisan, and mazdoor. To **Alavi (1974)** the rural society of India has been highly stratified in the process of agricultural development and commercialization of agriculture.

He pointed out that rural economy of India has been a part of colonial capital. To him the major agrarian classes in India are the bourgeoisie landowners, colonial landowners, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **significance of Agriculture societies** which play an important part in **rural development**, especially due to **land** use, in India where the sector is of greater economic significance

Agrarian Classes in colonial Period

The class dimension of Indian society, in the pre British period was less pronounced than it turned out to be during the British period. Village community produced only that was required for the consumption needs of the village. There was hence, little surplus and therefore, little differentiation among the village population. Class dimension, was overshadowed by the caste component. In fact, the only sphere where class dimension showed itself rather more sharply was in the nature of interaction between the rulers and the ruled.

The king and his courtiers represented a class quite different from the subjects over whom they ruled. The courtiers comprised the Zamindars, Jagirdars and several others. They along with the king lived on the revenue collected from the village community under their jurisdiction.

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

The period after 100 A.D. saw the growth of classes of traders, artisans, etc. in cities. In the Mughal period too, since a large share of village produce was taken to the urban market, the dynamism of the class structure of both the cities and villages but also a stable class of merchants, middlemen and bankers in towns and cities.

The socio-economic relationships of the rural areas were governed by traditional norms and values and by the customary patterns and conventions of great antiquity. According to Thorner, under this system the villagers inherited their traditional occupations. The artisans and craftsmen were also dependent on agriculture. They received a regular stipend from the crops of the village. The state had overall control over these village communities. In fact, the state was at the top of the agrarian hierarchy of landownership acting as the super landlord. Immediately below the state there were the jagirdars who in due course had become unquestionable owners of the lands allotted to them by the king. Then there were the zamindars. They were in fact the rent receivers. Below the zamindars were cultivators who also enjoyed hereditary occupancy rights. However, it is significant to note here that in those days, there was no concept of the sale and purchase of land, no market for the sale and purchase of agricultural produce, no private property rights in land and no employer and employee relationship in the modern sense of the term which were necessary for the emergence of class relations in agriculture.

These situations and relationships emerged for the first time in Indian agrarian society under the British rule.

British rule and class formation in India

The agrarian society in India became highly stratified in the British period. Various agrarian classes emerged as fallout of the implementation of the colonial policies in India. Here to further their interest, the Britishers, besides introducing new land tenure system, took effective steps for opening up of road and railway communications, promotion of export trade in certain agricultural commodities within the framework of the free trade policy of the colonial power. The developments during British rule which were responsible for the change in class relation include Changes in Agriculture, trade and commerce , Development of Railways and Industry, State and Administrative System.

The British administration **revolutionized the existing land system**. It created individual ownership rights in land by introducing several land tenure systems[1] during the 18th century, With this, land became a commodity in the market. It could be mortgaged, purchased or sold. Method of fixing land revenue at a specified portion of the year's actual produce was replaced by a system of fixed money payment irrespective of crops. The payment of revenue in cash gave way to production of cash crops in place of food crops. And with expanding railway and transport system production for market became fairly well established. This commercialization of agriculture, in turn, stimulated the growth of trade and commerce in India.

Typical Rural settlement

Much of India's rural population lives in nucleated villages, which most commonly have a settlement form described as a shapeless agglomerate. Such settlements, though unplanned, are divided by caste into distinct wards and grow outward from a recognizable core area. The dominant and higher castes tend to live in the core area, while the lower artisan and service castes, as well as Muslim groups, generally occupy more peripheral localities. When the centrally located castes increase in population, they either subdivide their existing, often initially large, residential compounds, add second and even third stories on their existing houses (a common expedient in Punjab), leapfrog over lower-caste wards to a new area on the village periphery, or, in rare cases where land is available, found a completely new village.

Within the shapeless agglomerated villages, streets are typically narrow, twisting, and unpaved, often ending in culs-de-sac. There are usually a few open spaces where people gather: adjacent to a temple or mosque, at the main village well, in areas where grain is threshed or where grain and oilseeds are milled, and in front of the homes of the leading families of the village. In such spaces, depending on the size of the village, might be found the panchayat (village council) hall, a few shops, a tea stall, a public radio hooked up to a loudspeaker, a small post office, or perhaps a dharmshala (a free guest house for travelers). The village school is usually on the edge of the village in order to provide pupils with adequate playing space. Another common feature along the margin of a village is a grove of mango or other trees, which provides shade for people and animals and often contains

a large well. There are many regional variants from the simple agglomerated-villages pattern. Hamlets, each containing only one or a few castes, commonly surround villages in the eastern Gangetic Plain; Scheduled Castes and herding castes are likely to occupy such hamlets. In southern India, especially Tamil Nadu, and in Gujarat, villages have a more planned layout, with streets running north-south and east-west in straight lines. In many tribal areas (or areas that were tribal until relatively recently) the typical village consists of rows of houses along a single street or perhaps two or three parallel streets. In areas of rugged terrain, where relatively level spaces for building are limited, settlements often conform in shape to ridge lines, and few grow to be larger than hamlets. Finally, in particularly aquatic environments, such as the Gangetic delta region and the tidal backwater region of Kerala, agglomerations of even hamlet size are rare; most rural families instead live singly or in clusters of only a few households on their individual plots of owned or rented land.

Most village houses are small, simple one-story mud (kacha) structures, housing both people and livestock in one or just a few rooms. Roofs typically are flat and made of mud in dry regions, but in areas with considerable precipitation they generally are sloped for drainage and made of rice straw, other thatching material, or clay tiles. The wetter the region, the greater the pitch of the roof. In some wet regions, especially in tribal areas, bamboo walls are more common than those of mud, and houses often stand on piles above ground level. The houses usually are windowless and contain a minimum of furniture, a storage space for food, water, and implements, a few shelves and pegs for other possessions, a niche in the wall to serve as the household altar, and often a few decorations, such as pictures of gods or film heroes, family photographs, a calendar, or perhaps some memento of a pilgrimage. In one corner of the house or in an exterior court is the earthen hearth on which all meals are cooked. Electricity, running water, and toilet facilities generally are absent. Relatively secluded spots on the edge of the village serve the latter need.

Almost everywhere in India, the dwellings of the more affluent households are larger and usually built of more durable (pakka) materials, such as brick or stone. Their roofs are also of sturdier construction, sometimes of corrugated iron, and often rest on sturdy timbers or even steel I beams. Windows, usually barred for security, are common. The number of rooms, the furnishings, and the interior and exterior decor, especially the entrance gate, generally reflect the wealth of the family. There is typically an interior compound where much of the harvest will be stored. Within the compound there may be a private well or even a hand pump, an area for bathing, and a walled latrine enclosure, which is periodically cleaned by the village sweeper. Animal stalls, granaries, and farm equipment are in spaces distinct from those occupied by people.

Trade and commerce were centered around two things. Supply of raw material for industries in Britain was one. Procuring of the British manufactured goods for consumption in India was another. Village and town handicrafts could not stand the competition brought about by import of goods from Britain and got disintegrated. Meanwhile there was lack of sufficient industrial development. The result was that the emerging industry could not absorb the displaced population, which eventually fell on an already stagnant agriculture.

Alongside the growth of trade and commerce, there was rapid **development of the transport system** in India from the middle of the 19th century. These developments were undertaken with a view to meet the raw material requirements of industries in Britain. The construction of railways and roads also gave scope for investment of British capital in India. It led to better mobility of troops and for establishment of law and order. Investment of British capital found an outlet initially in such spheres as plantations (indigo, tea), cotton, jute and mining industries. This was the beginning of the industrialization process in India. By then, there was accumulation of sufficient savings on the part of Indian traders and merchants. This served as capital and made possible the creation of Indian owned industries.

Even before these developments, the British government had organized a huge and extensive state machinery to administer the conquered territory. A large number of educated individuals were required to staff this machinery. The foreign rulers felt that there was a need for the introduction of Western education in India and to cater to the needs of the expanding economy and growing state machinery. As a consequence of the impact of British rule in Indian society experienced an uneven growth of social classes.

Emerging agrarian classes

In response to the factors mentioned above, the agrarian society of India became highly stratified. Class-differentiation^[2] was sharpened among various agrarian categories. The Zamindari system had three main agrarian classes; zamindars, tenants, and agricultural labourers. The Ryotwari system had two main classes: ryot-landlords and the ryot-peasants. The Zamindars (i.e. non-cultivating owners of land) were tax-gatherers, the tenants were real cultivators (often without security of land tenure), and the agricultural labourers had the status of bonded labour. In the Mahalwari areas as well classes of big landowners and cultivating peasants began to dominate in the agrarian society.

The following broad agrarian classes of the British Period in India can be identified

Landlords

The British land system gave enormous scope to the landlord class to exploit the poor peasantry and to make agriculture market-oriented. They were the owners of vast plots of land. However, there were various categories of landowners within this class viz., intermediary landowners (like the Zamindars, Talukdars, Patnidars etc.), the absentee landowners, the rich farmers etc. They employed mostly either the tenants, sharecroppers or the agricultural labourers for the purpose of cultivation of their land. They were the non-cultivating rentier class.

This landlord class emerged at the cost of the decay of the poor and medium cultivators who transferred their land to this new stratum. The high rates of interest varying from 400% to 500% made it impossible for the peasant to repay the loan. Thus he ended up transferring his land to the money-lenders. Money lenders also joined the army of landlords.

Tenants

They were holding leases under the landlords of various categories. Many of the tenants also employed under-tenants for the purpose of cultivation of a part of their land.

Peasant Proprietors

They were the cultivators of small plots of land with or without occupancy rights. They were mostly the subsistence cultivators and were dependent on family labour for the cultivation of their land. Small peasants and under-tenants belonged to this class.

Agricultural landless labourers

They mostly worked in the field of others for the mainstay of their livelihood. The agricultural labourers and sharecroppers belonged to this category. For subsistence many of the sharecroppers, worked as agricultural labourers seasonally, while the landless agricultural labourers sold their labour throughout the year. The destruction of traditional village and cottage industries led to significant section of the village artisans and craftsman joining the army of agricultural labourers since no other avenue of employment was left for them.

Trends in agrarian class structure

The British period has resulted in a phenomenal growth of the sharecropping system of land cultivation both in the Zamindari and Ryotwari areas. The spread of sharecropping system was related to the indebtedness of small peasants. When the peasants lost their land, because of their failure to repay the loan in time, they were resettled on the condition that they would pay half of the produce. The Land Revenue Commission (Bengal) showed that in 1940 of the total land sold and purchased around 12% was brought under sharecropping system of cultivation. They were in this sense incorporated in the category of landless agricultural labourers. Their number also sharply increased in this period. In Bengal their growth rate was tremendous. By 1901 they formed only 17.5% of the rural population of Bengal. Between 1921-31 their number increased to 49%.

Hence relations of production was primarily determined by the privileged section of the rural society and transformed the agrarian society from subsistence to commodity production. Ramakrishna Mukherjee making an in-depth study of Bengal points out that in such a given situation, the functioning of the economic structure of the society laid a basis for the emergence of class I (composed of the landlords and supervisory farmers); and

class III (composed of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers) at the expense of the decay of class II (composed of self-sufficient peasantry, artisans and traders).

The exploitation of the small peasants, tenants, under tenants, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers by the landlord class created underneath tension and conflict of interest between them. This situation also generated enormous discontent among the peasantry and this discontent was manifested in the form of peasant movements and organized mobilization of the peasantry in the national movement in various parts of the country. In the agrarian society of West Bengal, **Chandra (1975)** identified, the upper class landed families (including landlords, jotedars, rich peasants, marginal peasants) and the lower class (including landlords, jotedars, rich peasants, marginal peasants) and the lower class (including poor peasants and the agricultural labourers) to be the conflicting agrarian classes. **Andre Beteille** points out that agricultural development has produced a class of 'progressive farmers' in Punjab who invest significantly in agriculture and use all modern means of cultivation and have nexus with the wide markets. **Ashok Rudra (1981)** suggests that agricultural development has brought polarisation in the rural society.

To him there has been a class of landowners who occupy not only the vast areas of cultivable lands, but also possess all the modern means of cultivation. This class of big landowners reinvests a significant portion of their capital in agriculture to further their economic interest. Here he identifies two broad classes in the agrarian society of India viz. the class of big landowners and the class of agricultural labourers. **Hayami (1981)**, after examining the major facets of the agrarian transformation in contemporary India, points out that there has been the emergence of upper and the middle strata of the peasantry.

Conclusion

Agrarian classes in India have been a part of a long historical process. In this historical process the lowest section of the agrarian society has been subjected to utter poverty, insecurity, and unscrupulous exploitation. A large section of the rural population has been pauperized in this process. Many of the sharecroppers were evicted from the land; village artisans and craftsmen also lost the traditional avenues of their employment. They joined mainly the army of agricultural labourers for their livelihood. On the other hand, the upper strata of the peasantry also consolidated their economic interest. The economic prosperity of the rich peasantry has increased but the economic condition of the small peasants had deteriorated. The feudalistic type of tenancy has been replaced by the capitalistic type of lease-labour or wage labour agrarian system. Agricultural workers have not received the benefits of land reforms. Therefore the sociological process dominant in the current class transformations in the village involves 'embourgeoisement' of some and 'proletarianisation' of many social strata. Irrespective of the categorization, agricultural labourers are extremely insecured economically. They do not get assured employment throughout the year. Since they don't get full employment, they are to resort to seasonal out migration towards the agriculturally developed regions to earn the subsistence requirements of the family. However, agricultural labourers don't get even the minimum wage prescribed by law in most parts of the country.

Indeed in the absence of legal protection and political commitment for their betterment they suffer from existence economic insecurity, unemployment, poverty and ignorance. The benefits of growth have not reached this class.

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