

Emerging Agrarian Social Structure: Caste and Class Relations - A Sociological Study

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Abstract

The study of agrarian system has been taken up as mentioned earlier by anthropologists, sociologists and economists. However certain societies set up in villages for public welfare try to curb the situation yet the Maliks emerge strong. These cooperative public societies have been unsuccessful whereas the private traders are benefitting. It is important to somehow control the power of the landowners to reduce exploitation else they won't be a collective progress amongst the classes in our country and class relations will continue to get disintegrated. More than social problems, the labourers face economic financial problems. We can also not ignore their position in the hierarchical society, but the fewer employment opportunities and meager wages are a greater concern related to them. The more the employment opportunities the more will be the growth of agricultural economy and incentives to artisans in villages.

According to stats and survey, the work opportunities available to the village people are only for six months (agriculture periods) within which they have to earn as much as they can not forgetting its always insufficient. Thus any agricultural labour's average income is around Rs. 10,000 a year. This is why they always remain below the poverty line.

Key words : agriculture, rural India , agrarian structure , caste and class

Introduction

Post- Independence, we can say that rural India has structured itself into four classes and that is what becomes a part of the system. If we look at the agricultural field then it has three classes **within itself- landowners, tenants and the laborers; while the fourth class being of the non- agriculturalists**. The data of the distribution of these classes is as follows: landowners- 22%, tenants- 27%, agricultural laborers- 31% and non-agriculturalists only 20%. Because of the most population depending and sustaining their lives on agriculture, India is known as an agrarian country.

60% people here are marginal cultivators and own less than 2% hectares land, small cultivators- 16% with 2 to 5 hectares land, medium cultivators- 6% with 5 to 10 hectares land and big cultivators who comprise 18% of the population but own more than 10 hectares of land. In villages, every family gets land which is less than one-acre I.e, 0.4 hectares. 75% land area is occupied by food crops. About 35% of total production is sold by cultivators.

The marketing process is all in the hands of the intermediaries who are a link between the producers, cultivators, and sellers and regulate the trade. The village people live a miserable economic life which includes the agrarian proletarians, uneconomic holders of land in large numbers, few artisans and self- employed people. The agrarian structure establishes certain relations which can be classified as:

1. Defined and enforced by law
2. Which are customary
3. Which can fluctuate

Daniel rejects the rural classification into three in agriculture. (**Landlords, tenants, laborers**)

The reason for his rejection was that one same man could belong to all the classes simultaneously or could even change his position which is why it has a fluctuating relationship. The landlord or Malik will own his land and obtain his income through property rights in the soil (not necessarily), and then he could either give his land to any tenant or get it cultivated by the laborers himself or get them managed by someone else.

The Malik could have subsidiary incomes too either through other business or profession. The Malik's are two types- the ones who stay away from their land where agriculture takes place and those who stay in the village itself where the peasants are working. Maliks own more land as compared to the Kisan. The family income of kisans are low which is why the members end up working as labourers to earn the additional livelihood. They receive small wages in cash. On being unable to find work in their village itself, they migrate to other places or states to work as labourers in agriculture, industries or construction. Like mostly the Bihar people migrate to Punjab and Uttar Pradesh people to Maharashtra.

Daniel Thorner classified the classes on the basis of these classes:

1. Income obtained from rents, cultivation, wages in relation to the soil.
2. The nature of rights through ownership or tenancy.
3. Actual performance of [fieldwork](#).

N. Dhanagre (in Desai, 1983) proposed a different model of the agrarian classes. He says there are five classes: landlords, tenants, subtenants, sharecroppers; rich peasants or small landowners who have sufficient land to support their family, rich tenants have substantial holdings and give rent to landlords; middle peasants with medium size holdings; and poor peasants which include

1. landowners whose holdings are insufficient to support their family and are thus forced to rent someone else's land
2. Tenants with small property
3. Sharecroppers
4. Landless labourers

The poor peasants and labourers are always exploited by rich landowners which makes their relation unhealthy. The rich are the ones who have all social, economic and political power which keeps them in safe zone even if someone speaks to them.

The vast majority suffering as labourers are SCs, STs, and OBCs. They are in so bulk with all their social disabilities and low position that its difficult to completely eradicate all problems. The Agricultural Labour Enquiry had expressed its concern too. With some government policies for the farmers, labourers etc some of their social handicaps have diminished but still, their condition is not good and they are not considered a part of the village life and are regarded with disrespect if they are considered.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze agrarian social **structure** is meant the manner in which various social **classes** are organized and interact

Structural Stasis in Indian Agriculture

On a broader plane, the agrarian system as is conceived by social scientists in gen-eral, has been related to:

- (i) land and its utilisation; and
- (ii) productive purposes. He observes:

The study of agrarian systems will centre round the problem of land and its utilisation for productive purposes. In a land-based social and economic system the significance of this kind of study hardly re-quires emphasis.

Beteille, to refer to him again, it would be said that the land prob-lem in India and for that matter the study of agrarian social structure revolves round two major issues as under:

1. Technological arrangements, and
2. Social arrangements.

Technological arrangement means the management of land. It in-cludes landownership, control and” use of land. Technological arrangement is discussed in relation to variations in ecological condi-tions. In other words, land is looked in terms of the geography which surrounds the land. The ecological setting of agriculture in India is highly variable. The diverse nature of ecological conditions in India has been described by Beteille as under: There are areas of heavy rainfall and areas with hardly any rainfall. There are irrigated and unirrigated areas. Irrigated areas themselves differ according to the dependability of irrigation.... The different re-gions show different patterns of diurnal and seasonal variations in hu-midity, temperature and sunlight. All these factors have a direct bearing on the kinds of crops that can be cultivated and the technol-ogy employed in their cultivation.

The technological arrangements, thus, include ecological condi-tions along with the new agriculture technology, such as water pumps, thresher, chemical manure, improved seeds, etc. Another aspect of agrarian system is that of social management. It includes land control and landownership. It is found that the Indian agricultural communities have recently been highly stratified. It shows that there is close relationship between the system of stratifica-tion and the division of work.

For instance, the census figures show that in Punjab and Haryana the proportion of agricultural labourers in the total agricultural population is relatively low, whereas in West Bengal, Tamilnadu and Kerala, it is high. In the three states the prevalence of sharecropping is also high, but this fact is not easily recorded in the censuses and large-scale surveys.

K.L. Sharma has discussed the problem of agrarian stratification and argues that agrarian structures in India have always been uneven. He observes that despite the abolition of intermediaries not much substantive change in agrarian relations has come. The uneven structures of landholdings have also resulted in 'diverse land tenure systems'. The land tenure system, according to Sharma, has greatly affected the social structure. He writes: The variations in the relationship between land tenure system and social structure created an uneven feudal order in the pre-British and British periods. The shadow of the colonial and feudal inequality is still seen by us in various aspects of society. Sociologists and anthropologists, who have recently studied agrarian system, have very strongly argued that changes in land relations have affected the stratification pattern of villages. The crucial aspect of agrarian structure is the control over land.

It is the basis of agrarian stratification. When agrarian social structure is discussed invariably we refer to landownership, land control and use of land. Such an approach to land helps us to find out agrarian hierarchy. What has happened so far is that the dominant castes who, have control over major portions of land, suppress and exploit the subordinated classes.

Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, who have discussed the rural land reform with reference to untouchables, argue that the subordinated people have gained nothing out of land reforms. The present social stratification of the village is due to our failure to settle land reforms. The authors observe as under:

Land control is the basis of the agrarian hierarchy and, therefore, the means by which the dominants have subordinated untouchables the village. Small resources like a home site of one's own and even a very small plot of productive land can effect a powerful liberation of the subordinate untouchables from total and arbitrary dependence on their oppressor. Yet, another aspect of rural stratification is the pattern of cultivation adopted by the peasantry. If the cultivators take to crops which require hard labour, naturally it would require larger number of agriculture labourers. In the states of Punjab and Bihar where paddy is grown, larger number of labourers is hired. Even landless labourers migrate from Bihar to Punjab for transplanting paddy. The agrarian hierarchy, therefore, is the resultant of the crops grown by the peasantry.

Beteille has discussed the rural stratification pattern in terms of land control and land management. The productive organisation of land consists of three main patterns: the first is based on family labour, the second on hired labour and the third on tenancy conceived in a broad sense. The three patterns of production have several variants. And it is interesting to note that the production which requires hard manual labour such as that of transplanting paddy the pattern may change. Beteille has categorised the peasantry on the basis of production system. For in talking about production based on family labour, wage labour and tenancy, we are talking also about landlords, owner-cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers. These categories and their mutual relations constitute the heart of what may be described as the agrarian hierarchy...

the most crucial features of In-dia's rural social system and unless we understand its nature and forms, our understanding of caste itself will remain incomplete.

The rural India's basic problem today is the understanding of agrarian system. Control over land determines the rural hierarchy. What is interesting is that the state does not impose any income-tax on the far production. As a result of this state policy, those who con-trol larger portions of land, benefit the most. The rural agrarian hierarchy has today become more complicated owing to the land pol-icy adopted by the state. But the state land policy, as we have in India today, has not evolved overnight. It is the result of the colonial land policy which we have inherited and have carved it in post-independent India in such a way that it has taken a capitalistic mode of production instead of minimising the hiatus between the big farmer and landless labourer. We have intensified the social inequality. We now trace the land policy adopted by the colonial rulers and later, the nationalist government. Unseasonal rain, falling commodity prices, increasing input costs, decreasing size of land holdings, and now the political move to "acquire" all land into the globalizing market.

Green Revolution and the Spread of Capitalist Farming

The agony-list that agriculturists can make of their current situation can be even longer for all these are not just forms of a crisis, but also indicate the deceleration of the agrarian economy.

No longer synonymous with only village or agriculture, rural India is currently a mosaic of conditions which include vast tracts of impoverished habitations, small pockets of prosperous commercial agriculture, zones dependent on remittance economies, belts that are getting absorbed into the real estate grid, and regions that are integrated into the global extractive, mining industries. Migration seems to have intensified, from the earlier forms of seasonal and circular migration, to longer stretches and distances.

The growth of peri-urban areas and the movement of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour from the north and eastern belts to the southern regions of the nation have become significant. Within this mosaic, the life-conditions of the majority reflect the complexities of the economies that mark them and the overall failure of the political system to provide ameliorative mechanisms.

Instead of addressing the structural inequities of the rural worlds, there is an increasing focus on altering the rural through policies that privilege only the entry of capital and markets. Land markets, infrastructure, agricultural commodities, trade, pricing, productivity and patents are presented as panacea that in reality are enhancing rural inequities.

The continued neglect of marginal cultivators, or those who own or cultivate less than two hectares of land and who constitute nearly 80% of all cultivators, is the key reason why agriculture as an economy and a way of life continues to be entrapped in a deep morass. A complex agrarian structure where caste and class largely overlap and which determines life opportunities to a large degree continues to be the operative unit of rural India.

Over such a constellation of rural structures there is the layering of new models of agriculture in which high technology, increased capitalization and risk-laden markets play key roles. Each of these has only increased

the debt burden of agriculturists making agriculture not only a risk-ridden enterprise, but also a potentially self-destructive one.

The promotion of genetically modified crops is only one more indication of the extent to which there is the oversight of the voice, agency and representation of agriculturists and the privileging of the interests of agri-business who are now being abetted by politicians and compromised scientists.

In most states, the promise and potential of the panchayat system is largely derailed by the capture of local power by regional satraps and their families. A range of illegalities and leakages mark most transactions and several welfare programmes are yet to provide succour to the most deprived. In what must be the most ironic situation, one key programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, that seems to have provided some relief in several regions, is now sought to be diminished.

The results of interlinked structural inequities manifest as a range of vulnerabilities. These include the declining variety and quantity in the food basket of the working poor, which is resulting in malnutrition, including stunting, of children. And for those who seek their opportunities through migration to the cities, the weak manufacturing base and the new service economy provide no long-term support. In what is a major contradiction, there is both the simultaneous decline of women in agricultural labour and the growth of a feminization of agriculture in some regions, where women now bear the burden of retaining families in agricultural production.

Key questions that remain unaddressed include: What should be the new imaginaries by which the rural can be sustained? What diverse types and patterns of agricultural practices would be relevant for both livelihoods and ecological stability? How can public institutions especially those that pertain to health, food provisioning, and education be made viable and functioning? What type of linkages must the rural have with the urban? And what kinds of administrative structures are required to enhance the overall governance of rural areas? These are only a few of the issues that largely remain unaddressed.

The desperate conditions of rural India are marked not only by problems of declining livelihood opportunities, but also by growing ecological devastation. Dried lakes and rivers, depleted soils and fields, polluted water bodies, decreasing biodiversity are only some issues that make eking a livelihood difficult.

Unsuccessful Land Reforms

Added to this are new aspirations among youth who seek lifestyles and dreams that the all-pervasive satellite media provides and among whom the rural is as redundant as it is for most politicians. Youth exodus and distance from agriculture have resulted in a peculiar contradiction: of excessive population in the rural areas and yet the shortages of labour for agriculture.

If any genuine change in the agrarian sector and rural worlds are to be initiated, then it must come in the form of recognizing the citizenship rights of all rural residents and in integrating their viewpoints and ideas, recognizing the ecological specificities of varied agricultural zones, localizing food production and distribution, and promoting collective production and marketing abilities among the most marginal cultivators.

Only a focus on enabling an equitable society and a sustainable resource base, in which food security and rights to culturally diverse forms of living are central pillars, can the viability of a vibrant rural economy and society be assured.

New imaginaries of the rural are required, which will not treat rural residents as supplicants, patients, refugees, vote banks, or dependants. Recognizing that rural residents are central to strengthening the democratic and economic fabric of the nation will prepare us to face the complexities of addressing the iniquitous agrarian structure, and trends in global warming, food security, and the search for sustainable livelihoods and lives. 'Land reform' was an important constituent of the economic programme of 'national freedom movement'. Elaborate legislation was drafted after independence with a view to end the oppressive and exploitative feudal relations, provide land to the tiller and thus attain an equitable distribution of land and other resources in rural India. In general, there is a consensus that the land reform programme completely failed to attain its objectives. Notwithstanding abolition of absentee landlordship and intermediaries, the rich upper caste landlords retained feudal dominance through political, administrative and judicial machination. Wherever any progress was made towards reducing the domination of feudal interests, rich peasantry quickly appropriated the ensuing political and economic space. Tenancy legislations in the states only succeeded in driving tenancy underground. Concealed and informal tenancy exacerbated the misery of impoverished and marginalised tenant farmers. The record of imposing land ceilings and redistributing land has been dismal. Only a minuscule bit of land was redistributed and invariably it was barren and poor quality land.

Vast divergences exist with respect to formulation of legislation and its implementation at the state level. Thus, semi-feudalism remained intact in Bihar but the Marxist governments in West Bengal and Kerala did succeed in altering the rural production base. In Punjab consolidation of land was carried out efficiently, which was crucial for introduction of modern technology and mechanisation. It is, therefore, necessary to qualify any all-India level inference in this regard. In fact the divergence is so large that some scholars consider all-India generalisations to be futile.

A decade later 'land reform' agenda was pushed into background and 'green revolution' arrived on the forefront.

Conclusion

The possibility of capitalist industrialisation arising out of increased productivity in the pre-capitalist agriculture was thwarted in India by the colonial rule. The rigid land revenue system and commercialisation of agriculture in imperialist interests destroyed the production base of the extant peasant economy. Vast sections of peasantry were pauperised and reduced to landless or near landless status. In the year 1931, 32 percent of rural workforce was classified as landless. At the other end, land and consequently surplus got concentrated in few hands. This surplus was neither used for increasing productivity of agriculture, nor did it induce growth of manufacturing. Both the processes were constrained by limited size of home-market. India as a colony not only provided raw material to British industry but also markets for British manufactures.

The limited development of manufacturing replaced the artisans but did not create sufficiently many jobs to absorb the pauperised peasantry. The uprooted peasantry was forced to find livelihood opportunities in agriculture itself. This created a land lease market with very high rents and a labour market with wage rate below subsistence level. The landless and poor farmers leased in land to attain a cultivator status and took consumption loans to supplement their income. Landowners could then get high returns by leasing out land and usury. They had little incentive to invest in productive enterprises. They did cultivate land employing farm labour. These farms were characterised by small outlays and low level of technology. Farm labour was tied to these farms through debt bondages, oppressive caste relations and lack of opportunities elsewhere. As Utsa Patnaik clearly states this was not capitalist farming (see Utsa Patnaik *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation*, Oxford University Press, 1990). Capitalist farming with re-investment of surplus was confined to plantations. These were tiny enclaves – foreign owned and export oriented.

In short, the agrarian structure bequeathed to us by the colonial rulers was characterised by an extremely skewed distribution of land and other resources. Agriculture was stagnant with falling per capita production and availability of foodgrain. Further, possibility of accumulation through rent and usury prevented investment of surplus in productive enterprises. This historical overview helps in understanding the evolution of production conditions and production relations in the post independence period. It also points out the similarity between the neo liberal regime today and the colonial rule then.

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