UNIT 5 SOCIO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE - I

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss the structure of Indian society through the historical times. After reading this unit you will learn about the:

- the structure of Indian society during ancient period
- the social structure during the medieval period
- the evolution of major social institutions during the above stated periods,
- the important phases of social transformation in Indian society.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Units 5 & 6 of this Block we have discussed a structure of Indian society in the historical perspective. Unit 5 focusses on the evolution of Indian society upto medieval period and Unit 7 will cover the subsequent period of history.

In this Unit i.e. Unit 5 you will learn about the social life during the early Rigvedic period of ancient India and its different phases of change through the later Vedic period. You will see how the social institutions which emerged during this period were later transformed and became more rigid due to changes in the economy and the political organization of society. This took place due to the post-Vedic period when social codes were more rigidly defined through the composition of the Epics and Puranas. The great epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata composed during this period contain prescriptions about social, cultural and political norms of society.

The social rigidity and orthodoxy which developed in society during the period of the Epics soon led to protest and reform movements in society. It gave rise to religious and cultural movements such as Budhism and Jainism which revolted against the Vedic cultism and the rigid caste hierarchy. They also opposed social and cultural exploitation inherent in these institutions. The reform movements ushered by Budhism and Jainism were, however, limited in their spread. Their influence weakened over time and Hinduism once again revived. You will learn about how this revival of Hinduism was introduced and how it reinforced the rigid social norms of caste and occupation. It was about this time that Manu is attributed to have authored Manava Dharmashashtra, the law-code of the Hindu social organization. You will learn about the major social and economic changes taking place during this period, such as the rise of mercantile groups, expansion in trade and its links with the growth in handicraft and urban settlements.

This Unit will also offer you a perspective on how this period of Indian social history underwent new phases of transformation due to regionalisation of the Indian polity and disintegration of empires (of the Mauryas during the Budhist period and of the Guptas during the period of Hindu revivalism). It was during this transitional period that political and
5.2 INDIAN SOCIETY DURING THE VEDIC PERIOD

We will discuss the Vedic society in two sub-sections i.e. the early Vedic and the later Vedic society.

5.2.1 Early Vedic Period

The early Vedic society was largely based on pastoral economy and lineage mode of social organization. It comprised groups of households linked by descent or kinship bonds. Sets of different lineages comprised a social community. It represented an interdependent network of clans. This community being a pastoral economy had to move about. In this sense it functioned like roaming tribal bands. The key elements of social organization were: household, lineage, and tribal band. The members of this society were of fair complexion, skilled in the art of cattle raising and worshiped natural elements, primarily fire. They are called Aryans. and being a migratory people, they often clashed with the native inhabitants where they migrated. The Aryans seem to celebrate predatory power; they were prone to attack and often decimated their enemies of the native stock whom they characterize as the dark-complexioned Dasas. They used to capture them through warfare and used them as slaves.

Many Indologists are of the opinion that the Dasas were descendants from the Harappan civilization which was urbanized and consisted of urban settlements. The fear of the Aryans drove these people to take shelter in Vindhyachal areas. The Aryans characterized the Dasas as dwellers of caves in darkness. The social structure of the early Vedic society which resulted from this contact got divided between the Aryans and the Dasas. The Aryans during this time did not seem to have developed internal social stratification or rigid division of labour. The Aryan society was more equalitarian. The occupations, either of priesthood or that of warrior or a commoner, could be adopted by choice and were inter-changeable. A priest could become a warrior and vice versa. But rigid social gradation did appear to have existed between the Aryans and the Dasas. It was of domineering and exploitative character.

The Rigveda also has a mention of a people called the Pani who are portrayed as rich cattle-breeders and traders. These were non-Aryans and are mentioned as having dark-complexion or proto-Australoid features. They were probably of the Phoenician (Syrian) origin. They did not observe the Aryan rituals, or sacrifices. They conducted trade and commerce through exchange. The Aryans used to plunder the Panis and set fire to their settlements. They used to enslave them and called them also as Dasas. They usurped Panis’s wealth and cattle. Since both Dasas and Panis are reported to have proto-Australoid features, one could envisage similarities between the two categories of people. It seems that the interaction between the Pani-Dasa social segment with the Aryans slowly began to give rise to the elementary features of social stratification. it was based on distinctions of Varna (colour), which had racial characteristics. The institution we know today as the jati system had not yet fully emerged.

5.2.2 Later Vedic Period

Significant changes in social structure, cultural rules and division of labour came into existence during the later-Vedic period. The four-fold division of castes (jatis): the Brahmaana (priest), the Rajanya (rulers) or Kshatriyas, the Vaisya (traders) and Sudra (peasants) is referred to have originated from the body of the Purush (the great Being) in the Purusasukta of the Rigveda which is of a much later origin. The Purusasukta says: "the Brahmaana was his (purusa's) mouth, the Rajanya was made of his two arms; his thigh became the Vaisya. From his feet was produced the Sudra". Thus a relative differentiated social hierarchy seems to have emerged during the later Vedic period which got further consolidated during the Epic period. Social disabilities of the lower strata, particularly of the Sudra in regard to the access to sacred texts or their recitation were strictly imposed. The inter-changeability of occupations by voluntary choice was restricted to the upper segment of
the social strata. The priest also lost his generic role in society, based on voluntarily charitable roles such as exponent of military strategy, crafts or literary works. Their role was confined to presiding over rituals and sacrifices. The rationalisation of the Varna hierarchy was achieved through the sacrament of initiation or Yajnopavita (sacred thread) ceremony. It was allowed only in cases of the first three Varnas. The codification of rigid norms of social and ritual practices which robbed the basis of discrimination by the upper Varnas of the Sudras took place during the later-Vedic period. The composition of the Grahasutra (household sacraments) and Dharmasutra was completed. It debarred the Sudra and members of the lower Varnas from any privileges available to the upper Varnas. The process of Varna turning into Jati (caste) taking most out of the Jati feature of exclusion in respect of social, cultural and economic domains, had thus begun.

**Family and Lineage:**

The Vedic society had family and lineage as the two basic elements of its social organization. Most rituals and religious activities of the Aryans such as, the household sacraments related to life cycle (birth, initiation, marriage, death etc), the sacrificial rituals to appease gods for acquisition of magical powers to meet with challenges of nature, enemies and of rivals etc. were centred around the household, the lineage or the clan. The Grahasutra and Dharmasutras prescribe and illustrate the varied rituals and sacrifices and their normative principles. The head of the household had a very special role in performance of these rituals over which he often used to preside.

The term used for family in the Vedas is grha, and the head of the household is called grhapati. God Agni (fire) had a pre-eminent place in the sacramental rituals of the household, so much that some times Agni or the God of fire was called the grhapati, and the sacred fire in the household was named as grhapatyata. Most sacramental rituals in the family had the god of fire as the main deity and Grahasutra illustrates this relationship.

The structure of the family during the early period was of the nuclear or ‘elementary’ type having members not of more than two generations. The family had its network with the lineage of the clan. During the later Vedic period, however, there is evidence of the existence of the joint family. This may be indirectly related to the more settled agriculture and pastoral economy and the changing social composition of the process of production. The authority system in the family used to be largely partri-lineal but without clear evidence of the supremacy of patriarchy. It implies greater degree of gender equality and participation in family rituals and processes of production.

Lineage is yet another important social institution of the Vedic times. Lineage is defined as a corporate group of kins in unilineal relationship having a formal system of authority. These unilineal descent groups constitute a clan when several of them come together under a specific institution of authority. The authority can be of a ‘chief’, a Rajanya for whom also the term Grhapati has been used. The lineage and clan, therefore, constituted the political system of the Vedic society. Its constituents were: household, lineage and clan.

**Upanisads and Protest Against Brahmanic Ritualism:**

It is probably inherent character of society that over-emphasis on ritualism and perpetuation of command over privileges by a closed group leads sooner or later to protest. The Upanishads and Aranyakas which were composed in-between the periods of the early and late Vedic society exemplify protest. These texts exhort that cumbersome and expensive sacrifices do not lead to real knowledge. They challenge the supremacy of Brahmanus and the Varna hierarchy. Interestingly, the authorship of the Upanishads is attributed primarily to the Kshatriyas, members of the lower Varnas and women. They are also written in relatively simpler language and therefore, attained more popularity. Instead of ritualism they emphasize abstract metaphysical principles and mystical meanings of reality. In some Upanishads (e.g. Chandogya Upanishad) there are derogatory references about Brahmans and they are portrayed as greedy self-serving people.

The Upanishadic protest, however, was not enduring. Its influence could not sustain itself and the ritualistic Veda-ism soon re-asserted itself with the composition of the Sutras (Grahasutra and Dharmasutra) whose intimate relationship with the household and lineage rituals and sacrifices we have already analyzed.
5.3 POST-VEDIC SOCIETY

We get historical records of the post-Vedic society from 600 B.C. onwards. It seems that by this time lineages and clans which in the past were emerging as nascent political institutions had assumed the forms of either republics or monarchies. The institution of hereditary kings, who were mostly kshatriyas, was still flexible but the formation of state, as a political body, had emerged. It soon consolidated itself into the Mauryan empire which ushered in many significant changes in the social structure of society. The changes got further impetus with the new revolutionary cultural and religious accompaniments of Buddhism and Jainism. Both these religious movements constitute the core of the social and cultural protest against orthodox Brahmanical emphasis on rituals and animal sacrifices. The incipient seeds of such protest, as you have learnt already existed during the period of the Upanishads. But both Buddhism and Jainism led to a radical departure on the perspective on religion and society as never existed before.

Exponents of both Buddhism (Gautam Budha) and Janism (Mahavir) were kshatriyas. Both placed great emphasis on nonviolence and universal pichte or compassion. Both rejected the Brahmanical orthodoxy on caste, its social and cultural discriminations and ritualism which had assumed-expensive and exploitative proportions. Unlike Brahmanism both Buddhism and Janism had atheistic worldview. The origin of these two radical religious and social movements had its linkages with economic, political and social structural changes in the post-Vedic society.

Social and Structural Changes:

The evidence regarding the post-Vedic society suggests that by this time social structure had already undergone changes as a result of processes of social assimilation and interaction with a host of communities, both alien and native. The scale of integration and stratification of the Aryan and non-Aryan groups into caste and class had very substantially been enlarged. It was also rendered more complex and rigid in terms of hierarchy and inequality. In addition to the four-fold varnas a fifth category of 'untouchables' had now sprung up. The untouchables were probably aboriginal tribes who lived by hunting and food gathering and were treated as the lowest stratum of society. It also implies the existence of the notions of pollution-purity in a rigid form in the caste hierarchy. The notion of Varna which was relatively an open social system in respect of inter-varna mobility got by this time converted into caste (jati) as a closed system (membership only by birth).

The complexity of the caste system was also accompanied by differentiation between the agricultural and industrial mercantile economies. The surplus generated by these economies were channeled by state into urban centers which had emerged by now. It also contributed to differentiation among intellectual and cultural elites and groups involved into arts, crafts and trade etc. It contributed to emergence of cultural elite which could challenge established Brahmanical-Vedic orthodoxy. Long before the rise of Buddhism and Janism which provided this challenge to orthodoxy many philosophers and thinkers of radical dissent were spreading their ideas. Charvaka offered an atheistic worldview supporting total materialism.

Budhism and Janism, however, had a systemic impact ideologically as well as socially. In the first instance they rejected Vedic beliefs and rituals. Secondly, their exponents as well as followers came from non-Brahmanical strata. The kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, the shudras and the untouchables comprised their following and their leadership. It is possible that the process of economic diversification, urbanization and increased social differentiation formed the positive-contributory factors in the growth of these dissent ideologies. The negative factors were of course social and economic deprivations arising out of rigid caste norms, ritualistic segregation and exploitation of non-Brahmanical segments of society and imposition of inequality norms.

Impact of these changes led to the elaboration of the occupational categories and probably the numbers of castes and classes. We get some insight into this process through Kautilya’s Arthashastra and Megasthenes’s (ambassador to Mauryan court) Indika. Megasthenes refers to seven castes to have existed at this time. These are: philosophers, farmers, soldiers, herdsmen, artisans, magistrates and counselors. These are of course occupational rather than caste categories. But these give us insight into the level of social differentiation in society at this time. Similarly, Arthashastra also offers a variety of castes and occupational categories. It also mentions the existence of the institution of slavery whose existence is denied by
Megasthenes. It is possible that some form of bonded relationship existed (which even now prevails in some parts of India) between master and servant quite akin to slavery. In Arthashashtra we also get an insight into the development of corporate, administrative, commercial, military and economic-fiscal institutions. These further reinforce the evidence about the existence of elaborate urban centres as the hub of economic, administrative, cultural and political activities. We also have some evidence of urban-rural migration and reciprocal cultural and economic interaction during this period.

Family, Lineage and Caste: Some Aspects of Change:

With the increased levels of social differentiation between the rural and urban and agricultural and industrial-mercantile occupations significant changes also took place in the nature of caste—Varna relationship and also in the social composition of castes. This had an inevitable impact upon the traditional lineage-clan related social organizations both in the rural and urban communities. In the urban centres industrial and mercantile guilds came into being which were largely caste based. These guilds not only functioned as economic institutions for production and trade but also as political and cultural pressure groups when occasion arose. This had also the effect of emergence of strong business castes in cities which were mostly followers of the Jainism. In an incipient form this period also marks the beginning of the overlapping relationship among the categories of caste-class and occupation in India which continues even to this day.

In the rural areas, where still most of the population resided, castes had begun to undergo changes with new economic and political implications. Caste lineages and clans had probably begun to take upon themselves more and more economic and political functions rather than serving as units of ritual and cultural reciprocities. Here the combination of the factors of ritual-occupational and political functions in the caste organization served the same purpose in the rural economy as the guilds did in cities. It may be presumed possibly that caste panchayats, in the process of formation were responding to such domains of requirement.

In this process of change lineages and clans were subsumed in caste organization or a beginning in this direction had started. It marked a transition from tribal-segmentary mode of social organization to caste-based organic social organization in which reciprocity of functional division among castes constituted the foundation of social organization.

The structure and function of family system did respond to these changes. Corresponding to the rise in the economic surplus both in the agrarian and mercantile-industrial economies the tendency towards maintaining larger households (joint family) received reinforcement. The land-owning peasants (formerly shudras), mercantile households, urban and rural aristocracy came in this category. The position of women also changed particularly among those professing Buddhism and Jainism where the scope of their cultural and religious participation was expanded.

Check Your Progress - 1

1) Write a short note on Aryans.
2) What was the four-fold division in later Vedic society?

3) Give a brief account of social impact of Jainism and Buddhism.

5.4 GUPTA AND POST GUPTA PERIOD

The period of Indian history which followed the disintegration of the Mauryan empire (200 B.C. - A.D. 300) brought many changes in society and culture. There was decline in the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism's preachings, however, got a wider reach outside the country during this period. Within the country both Buddhism and Jainism had always had a concentration in some areas and flourished due to patronage from kings. Its decline took place due to extreme routinization of its cults in monastic orders and also because of the renaissance in Hindu philosophy, epics, code-books and saintly traditions. The weakening of the empire was marked also by incursions from central Asia of a host of invading groups such as the Kushans, Indo-Greeks and Shakas etc. They established their kingdoms, though short-lived, and were mostly followers of Buddhism. This incursion of outside groups also led to proliferation of new communities which had to be integrated within the caste-fold. It also contributed to fragmentation of castes into sub-castes. Despite the fluidity of polity the economy and its social organization through guilds and business houses in cities and the peasant castes in villages flourished. This brought about ultimately the renaissance in literature, architecture, art, philosophy, and Hindu thought. It also consolidated social codes and laws governing Hindu society known as the Smritis.

This renaissance happened during the rule of the Guptas. This dynasty came to power with the enthronement of Chandra Gupta I (about A.D. 319-20) who ruled over Magadh and eastern Uttar Pradesh. During this time and part of the period preceding it there was a spurt of literary, architectural and philosophical contribution. For this reason historians also name this period as the classical period of Indian history.

Social and Economic Changes:

The Gupta period led to the consolidation and expansion of social and economic institutions. Economically, there is evidence to suggest that revenue from land increased substantially, and their was expanded investment in business, commerce and production of artefacts. The social organization of guilds and their function was also reinforced. Socially, encoding of social laws through Manu's Dharmashashtra and consolidation of the positions of both Brahmanas' and Shudras created more rigid caste hierarchy. The notion of dwija (twice-born) comes into vogue about this time although its nuances did exist in the past. This increased the caste discriminations and disabilities in society. The Buddhist Sangha (monasteries) continued, although their influence shrunk more and more to some regions and
incorporate many of the elements of Brahmanical religion.

Multiplicity of castes and subcastes increased because of continual migration of new communities, proliferation of occupational categories due to expansion of administration, intellectual activities, rise in professions and also due to social mobility among castes through conversion and reconversion route between Hinduism and Buddhism. Jainism also gave rise to a host of caste and subcaste categories due to occupational specialization of different lineages. Prosperity in agriculture led to increase in the rural division of labour giving rise to a number of sub-categories of caste and subcastes.

Yet another distinctive feature of this period is the renaissance in intellectual productions such as literature, philosophy, art and architecture. Aryabhata made his basic astronomical contribution. Varahamihir's astronomical work *Panchsiddhantika* (five schools of astronomy), Kalidasas's famous sanskrit plays *Shakuntalam* and *Meghaduta* and the enunciation of six philosophical systems e.g. *nayya vaisheshika, sankhya, yoga, mimansa and vedanta* took place about this time. The *puranas* were also composed and popularised. In addition, this period marked the distinctive contributions in temple architecture, the construction of Budhist *chaitya* and *stupa* (worshipping hall and its complex) and many other artistic creations.

In terms of social and cultural changes we witness during this period a continual interaction between the people of northern and southern kingdoms. Migration of scholars, artists, trading and banking communities increased to a very significant level. This was because during this period export of artefacts, agrarian products and textiles necessitated this interaction. There was significant level of maritime trade, export and import. This also increased interaction between north, south and western regions. The mercantile communities of *Shreshthins* (financiers) in north which had already emerged during the Buddhist period could be compared with Chettis and Chettiars of south India. Brahmanical and vedic literature and philosophical interpretations flourished in south India. The southern kingdoms of Chola, Chalukya and Satavahanas brought about new impetus to economic, cultural and religious creativity which attracted people from other regions. Buddhism also travelled to the far- east to Java, Sumatra, thailand, China etc. This led to increased interaction within regions in India and also to lands beyond and outside India.

Not only contributions to systematization of philosophy and religion get impetus but also there was resurgence in Hindu religious movements at the level of folk and peasantry. This was particularly so in the period following the classical Gupta era, a time marked by rise of regional forces and feudatories in the process of weakening or the rule of the Gupta's. Many religious Hindu sects such as Vaishnavism of Ramanuja, Viraishavism or Lingayat movement founded by Basavraj and several devotional cults sprung up during the period of the rise of the southern kingdoms. Vaishnavism reiterated Brahmanical system of beliefs and rituals but the Lingayats questioned the authority of the Vedas and followed rituals and beliefs which were non- Brahmanical in nature. About this time Tantrism and magico- religious beliefs and practices also developed in some parts of India. Towards the end of the Classical period of the Gupta's not only the southern kingdoms gained ascendancy but there was rapid regionalisation and feudalisation of society and culture. It brought about a greater degree of pluralisms of social customs, religious practices and political organisations, but also weakened the centralized polity which made the transition to the emergence of Muslim kingdoms possible. This development brought about a new era of social and cultural changes in the Indian society.

5.5 MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Following the end of the "Classical" period (C.700 A.D.) many regional kingdoms led by different clans came into existence. Chauhans, Parihars, Chandellas etc. established their rule in north and western India. There was much internecine conflict and rivalry among them. By A.D. 977 Mahmud of Ghazni (a principality located in Northern Afghanistan) invaded northern India. He was followed later (twelfth century) by Muhammad Gori whose invasion eventually led to the establishment of the rule of the Turks and Afghans. It was the beginning of the Sultanate which lasted upto A.D.1526. From this period onwards the rule of the Mughals increasingly settled down ushering in new dimensions of social change.
Changes in the Caste Structure:

Major changes in the caste structure took place during the reign of the Sultans and the Mughals. Not only were these changes due to an expansion of economic and trade activities or due to forces of internal differentiation but mainly due to the contact between two major traditions and worldviews: that of Hinduism and Islam. The former legitimizing caste hierarchy and cultural and social inequalities by birth and karma (deeds in past life) and the latter professing equality of all within Islamic brotherhood or umma (the community of the faithfuls). Despite these differences of ideology or worldview, however, we perceive that the institution of caste or caste-like social grouping did come into being among the Muslims in India. This may be explained partly by the adaptive tendencies within Indian Islam to accommodate the converts to the faith groups already having caste divisions. It may also be a result of emergence of new social status graduation through the emphasis on exclusiveness by Muslim aristocracy, literati and upper classes settling down in India from abroad. The rules of endogamy were strictly practiced by these Muslim ruling and aristocratic classes among themselves to the exclusion of the native Muslims or those having lower social occupation.

Another institution which added impetus to the emergence of caste-like structure among the Muslims and which also contributed to the differentiation of caste groups among the Hindus was new agrarian structures. The institution of feudalism had already started coming into vogue during the period of the Guptas but had added depth during the period of regionalisation of the polity during the last days of this empire. During the rule of the Muslim kings it developed into the system of land grants to the nobility and assignments implied land grants to the nobles by king, granted land rights differentiating between the assignee, land lord of the land and the tenantry, obligation on the part of each to provide services to the king by pre-determined conventions, such as tributes and taxes, providing soldiers and maintaining them on behalf of the king and rendering such other services as demanded by the king. Similarly, the tenants of the feudal lord had obligations towards him by way of offering gifts, man-power for armed forces, paying rents and observing many customary taboos in life style to show respect towards the king. This institutionalised a whole set of cultural and social norms of inequality, with rules of reciprocity in social, economic and cultural domains. The agrarian system contributed to many changes in the function and structure of castes. It led to the economic and social consolidation of peasant castes in most part of the country to protect their interests in relation to their jagirdars. There is evidence of a series of peasant protests and revolts during the Mughal rule in which the kings had to mediate upon to maintain social and economic peace.

Changes in Hindu and Muslim Castes:

Many changes took place in the caste system during the Muslim rule (from the Sultanate to the end of the Mughal rule) which had far reaching implication for the society. Among the Hindu castes the contact with the Islamic culture introduced not only adaptive new cultural processes in belief and rituals but also led to changes in the structure of caste. One major structural change took place by subdivision among castes due to growth of new role or occupational categories. It also led to emergence of new castes. The process itself gave upper caste status to many lower castes because evidence suggests that many shudras among Hindus and members from low Muslim occupational groups or castes were accorded offices through land grants. Coming into prominence of the kayasthas with several sub-castes during this period marks a significant change. Of course, they had a relatively longer history in the past (puranas make a mention of them) but they assumed important administrative and clerical role during the rule of the Muslim kings. Most other Hindu castes underwent subdivisions leading to horizontal proliferation of castes.

Among the Muslim community caste-like structured emerged through the process of differentiation of racial or ethnic divisions, occupational hierarchy and the presence of converts with pre-existing caste ranking. The original migrants like warrior groups and literati form central Asia who had distinctive racial features and constituted the ruling elite made the upper caste rung for the Muslim community. Sayyeds, Shekhs, Pathans coming from Turko-Afghan, Persian and Mughal origin made the upper hierarchy. It was followed by a host of middle rank Muslim castes of artisans, weavers, cultivators and traders known by many local names in different regions e.g. julaha, ansar, darzi, saifi, etc. They had middle rank in the system of graduation. Lowest in hierarchy were those performing menial jobs such as bhilshi (water carriers), bahelia (trappers), bhand (bards) etc. There was also a category of pirs, faquirs and dervesh etc. which emerged through growth in Muslim shrines.
of Sufi saints as a result of interaction of mystical Islam with Hindu devotional traditions. This led to greater interaction between the Islamic and Hindu traditions at the grass-root levels as also to rapid expansion of the influence of Islam over the Hindu population.

It is interesting to note that most of these changes which took place in the caste system during the Muslim rule have not undergone much structural alteration even to this day except for the processes of rapid vertical social mobility among both the Hindu and Muslim castes in India.

Check Your Progress - 2

1) Give a brief account of social changes during the Gupta period.

2) How the caste structure was influenced during the rule of Muslim kings?

5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit a study of Indian society during ancient and medieval period has been undertaken. During early Vedic period there was lineage mode of social organization. During later Vedic period significant changes in social structure took place with the coming of four fold division of castes. Family and lineage played important role in Vedic social organisation.

During post Vedic period the social structure became more complex, rigid and hierarchical. During this period the rise of Buddhism and Jainism influenced the social organization in many ways.

The Gupta and post-Gupta periods of Indian history witnessed important changes in social structure. The racial codes also got consolidated during this period.

With the coming of the Muslims Indian society underwent many changes. At the same time the Muslim society which had never known any caste structure also got influenced. The Muslims theoretically did not accept the caste structure but in practice the caste like structures found a place.
In Unit 6 of this Block we will continue our discussion on social structure in colonial and independent India.

5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

**Check Your Progress - 1**

1) See Sub Sec. 5.2.1.
2) See Sub Sec. 5.2.2.
3) See Section 5.3.

**Check Your Progress - 2**

1) See Sec. 5.4.
2) See Sec. 5.5.
Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we have focussed attention on the socio-historical perspective of Indian society from the colonial period, to the contemporary period. After studying this Unit you will be able to:

- describe the nature of society during the colonial period, post colonial period and the contemporary period,
- explain the concept of caste, its structure and functioning among the various religious communities like Hindus, Muslims and Christians,
- explain the concept of caste and class in India, and
- outline the main aspects of continuity and change in Indian society.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The main aspects of Indian social structure, such as, caste and class, social problems and continuity and change in society have been broadly outlined in this Unit. The Unit carries forward the discussion we started in Unit 5. Here we will discuss the nature of society that excited in India when th British arrived. We will take note of the changes experienced during the colonial period. The social structure in post colonial India will also be discussed. A discussion on the concept of caste and class in India will also be undertaken. The influence of national movement on social ethos and thinking will also find a place.

6.2 SOCIETY IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Society in India has been historically marked by several conquests and invasions. However, prior to the British conquest, these conquests and invasions had led to a change in the political regimes only. As far as the basic economic structure of India was concerned, these political changes did not penetrate to the largely agrarian village society.

India had maintained a relatively stable, more or less, stagnant socio-economic existence for several centuries. Sociologists and social Anthropologists assign this characteristic feature
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of Indian society to the self-sufficient village system which was based on:

- land possessed by the community,
- unity of village industry and agriculture,
- the village as the unit of revenue assessment, and
- village production almost exclusively for use by the village community.

This structure of society according to a leading sociologist A.R. Desai "triumphantly survived, in its main outlines for centuries all foreign invasions, military convulsions, religious upheavals and dynastic wars", in pre-British India.

The self-sufficient village society survived successfully the most violent political storms, religious upheavals, dynastic wars and military holocausts. This stubborn survival of the economic structure of pre-British society, was according to Desai, due to the fact that none of the invaders or belligerents represented a new mode of production, higher than the feudal mode on which the Indian economy was based.

The British conquest of India, therefore, brought about tremendous change in the social, economic, political and ideological framework of society. The colonial impact on the one hand destroyed the self-sufficient village economy and society, and, on the other hand, it introduced far reaching novel ideas of Western society like the concept of equality, liberalism, humanism and rationality. These ideas, absorbed by a class of intellectuals belonging to largely upper castes led to the rise of reform and revivalistic movements such as of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and so on.

6.2.1 Colonial Period

At the advent of the British who arrived in India and established the East India Company, society in India was in a state of ferment. From the death of Aurangzeb in 1706 to 1818-19 when the Maratha power was crushed and the British hegemony was recognised all over the sub-continent a period of all round decline had set in.

The British Mercantile interests were such that it ruined the indigenous industries and led to widespread impoverishment of the artisans. The political tyranny of the British became increasingly oppressive since 1757 after the battle of Plassey. The social and economic decline continued inspite of several well meaning British administrators who attempted to reform the system but were held back because of "home interest" on the one hand and because they relied on the petty European Officers and Indian agents for the execution of their policies on the other.

Also, till 1813, and more correctly till 1833, the East India Company was primarily interested in its trading activities and the profits derived from the revenue thus accrued from the territory they controlled. Another feature of Indian society which discouraged or dispirited them from introducing social reforms was the fear that they might be misunderstood by the people. The strong religious basis of Indian society and culture were alien to them and to disturb it was not in their interest.

However, for their own convenience they introduced the railway system for transport of goods, personnel, effective communication, etc. British were also responsible for introducing telegraph and postal system. But some of the leaders of the British Public who surveyed the dismal scene in India during the 19th century were conscious of their responsibilities and were concerned about its state of affairs. Therefore, we find that India was one of the main issues of debate in the British Parliament and arguments centred around the question of how to promote the social and cultural welfare of the people of India, to which British Parliament had committed under the pressure of humanists like Edmund Burke and his followers.

During the colonial period, as a measure of economic reform the Permanent Settlement of land revenue was introduced in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. It was started with the intention of recognizing the rights of the countrymen and also to create a class of Indian Zamindars, such as the landed aristocracy of England, who would support the British rule in their turn. Due to this settlement, the land which in India was never owned by individual proprietors, was not owned by individual proprietors, was not even ever the property of the King or the Feudatory became a marketable commodity. This led to various changes in the social structure of the
village community. You will learn more about this in the last sections on continuity and change in India.

6.2.2 Post Colonial Period

The freedom struggle brought about independence in 1947 when the political reign of the government passed over to Indians by the British Government. Free India continued with the parliamentary democracy introduced by the British. On 26th January, 1950 India was declared a Republic and the Constitution of India was formally adopted. The Preamble of the Constitution which provides its aims and objectives, proclaimed India to be a Sovereign Democratic Republic. Later on the terms "Socialist Secular" was also added. The constitution aimed to secure to its citizens - justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

The post colonial society was marked by an intense period of constructive changes, idealism and optimism. The Five Year Plans were adopted to bring about economic development through a socialistic pattern. Thus, mixed economy was adopted which gave emphasis to both the private sector as well as the public sector. Private Sector covered areas, such as, agriculture, some of the industries, etc. where the individual economic initiative counted. The public sector was controlled by the Indian Government. The largest and best example of Public Sector in India is the Indian Railways, some of the industries, and later even banks, came under the public sector. This was done to protect the largely poor, underdeveloped and backward people of India, who would not have been able to survive without the government support. Pro-poor efforts were made by giving subsidised food, electricity, education, etc. in order to maintain the socialistic ideal of India's leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Zamindari system was abolished after Independence in 1950 in order to remove the intermediaries from agriculture. The Land Ceiling Act was passed so that effective land distribution could take place and land could go to the tillers. However, all these land reforms made only a minor dent and people, especially of upper castes and class found ways and means to control land and thereby power in the rural areas. Community Development Programmes were also initiated in 1952 to bring about social economic changes in the rural areas. Developments in science, technology and research brought tremendous changes in agriculture. Instead of consumption alone, now farmers started growing crops for the market i.e. cash crops. This led to the commercialisation of agriculture. During the 1960's and 70's all these developments led to the "Green Revolution" in areas of Haryana, Punjab, Western U.P., Maharashtra, etc.

6.2.3 Contemporary Period

However, contemporary period which we may consider to be from 1980's onwards has seen a shift from the earlier socialistic pattern with the selective opening of market and liberalisation. There have been changes in several areas. Modern Mass Communication technologies like radio, television, satellite television, transport systems, etc. have brought Indian society close to the global society. Computer and Computer networking, fax and other electronic advances are changing the very face of not only Indian society but other societies of the world, as well.

But despite of phenomenal change in lifestyle, values, behaviour, etc. many of the traditional structures and values related with them persist. One major structure which emerges time and again is caste structure. It has changed a lot from its earlier form of being rooted in the concept of purity and pollution. But its main persistence lies in its relationship with kinship and marriage.

In the next section we will explain the concept of caste and class in detail.

Check Your Progress-1

1) What was the most distinctive feature of colonial period as against the pre-colonial period?
6.3 CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

To understand the rural and urban social structures of India, the understanding of the concept of caste and class becomes very important. The importance of caste in determining the nature of human groups and human relationships in India is self-evident when we examine the nature of Indian society. Class in India is to be understood in the historical sense as being closely related to caste. In the pre-colonial period it overlapped with caste. Due to various changes introduced by the British caste and class have emerged as "dissonant categories" i.e. the upper castes may not be upper classes as well.

6.3.1 Concept of Caste

Caste is a system of social stratification which lies at the very root of Indian social structure. By social structure, we mean the persistent pattern of social interaction existing within and among social groups. These patterns of interaction are guided by the normative system of the society.

Caste structure is thus a pattern of social behaviour in which groups and individuals are guided by prescribed set of norms, values and sanctions.

The groups and individuals occupy specific statuses within and in relation to other groups. In this system individuals are born into a certain caste and thereby occupy the associated status and take up the role in accordance with that caste identity. Thus, caste is a closed ended social group.

Sociologists have defined caste or 'jati' (as locally referred to) as a 'hereditary' endogamous group which is usually localised. It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally maximum commensality i.e. interdining within the caste. This definition described the ideal form of caste system. However, in real life there are innumerable variations and permutations in terms of structure and functioning of caste system.

Being a dynamic reality which is highly flexible, it has shown tremendous variations from one region to another. In spite of all its variations found in different regions of India and its persistence in other religious communities, there are some aspects which enable us to identify it. This continuity element of caste is related to its linkage with:

i) A 'varna' system or order which is recognised all over India. As per this model, there are four 'varnas' which literally means colour and which are associated with certain occupations. These are the Brahmans (priests and scholar), the Kshatriya (ruler and the soldier), the Vaishya (merchant) and the Shudra (peasant, labourer and servant). All the various castes and subcastes or jatis which approximately number about 4000 belong to these four varna. The first three varnas, i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya are twice born or 'divine' since the men of these castes are entitled to do the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of Upanayana. The shudras were not allowed to perform this rite. The other castes and tribal groups did not fall into this 'varna' category.
ii) Caste structure is closely interlinked with kinship system amongst the Hindus in India. The sole reason for this relationship lies in the endogamous nature of caste system. Endogamy means marriage within one's own social group or community.

Caste is basically a closed system of stratification, since members are recruited on the basis of ascribed status. An individual becomes a member of a caste in which he or she is born and generally marries a person belonging to the same caste. Even if there is social mobility in the caste system through the process of sanskrification, urbanisation, etc., it is only a positional change in the local caste hierarchy rather than a structural change.

Kinship system in India is largely an analysis of the internal structure of the sub-caste or jati. The sub-caste is the largest segment of caste and it performs nearly all the functions of caste like endogamy, social control, etc. It is these segments of the main sub-caste which form the effective functioning group within which social interaction, marriage, etc. take place.

iii) Lastly, caste as mentioned earlier, had traditionally been associated with certain occupations. These occupations were categorised into 'clean' and 'unclean' occupations depending on the degree of pollution or purity associated with them. For example, those castes which were associated with sweeping and scavenging i.e. dealing with dead animals were considered to be 'unclean' occupations/castes. Those castes associated with learning and scholarly pursuits especially of Veda, were considered to be 'clean' castes, such as, the Brahmin. This was because learning, specially of the religious scriptures, was associated with the concept of purity.

Each caste had its own caste panchayat which took care of the traditional socio-cultural and territorial boundary of the caste. It had the power of excommunication or punishment like fine, etc. to keep its members in control. There was also an economic aspect of caste which linked different castes of a village or surrounding villages to each other. This link was of economic and social nature where one caste served another in a 'jajmani' relationship or patron-client relationship.

From a purely Brahmanic or sanskritic view, it appears as if, this system was rigid and closed. However, when we examine historical data ranging back to the Vedic period we find that in reality there existed a lot of flexibility in social mobility with the gain of economic and political power. There are a number of examples from 5th century B.C. when many lower caste groups tried to acquire the status of Kshatriyas through usurpation of political power.

Caste system should best be understood as a dynamic reality having a degree of flexibility in terms of internal structure and functions which has adopted to the need of changing times. For example, during colonial and post colonial period we see the emergence of caste associations, such as, the Kshatriya Mahasabha, the Nadar Mahasangam, etc. which were totally modern social groups. Although these associations were based on caste and community, they functioned like model organisations aspiring to gain social, political and economic benefits for their members.

Caste system was found not only in the Hindu communities but some features of it are present in other religious communities as well. One major reason for this was that some of these religious communities have large number of 'converted' Hindus, such as, amongst the Muslims, the Christians and the Sikhs.

6.3.2 Caste in Different Communities

Some of the broad features of caste system of stratification have already been explained to you. Let us now concentrate on the specific communities and features of caste system found amongst them.

a) Caste amongst the Hindu

A Hindu is born in a jati (caste) and follows his/her dharma in this birth to improve the future birth. As you learnt earlier, Hindus are divided into four varnas namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishhya and Shudra. These four categories are ranked from higher to lower in the order mentioned here. The varna system of dividing the members of the Hindu society is an ideological construct which is mentioned in the Hindu religious scriptures. As mentioned earlier, each varna is associated with particular occupations and the identity of all Hindus
can be placed in terms of one of the four varnas. Most of the basic ideas on varna system and its links to the concepts of karma, i.e. deeds done by an individual and dharma i.e. duties of an individual morally prescribed by religion, are generally present in the thinking of Hindus.

The life of a Hindu is considered to be divisible into four stages called Varnashrama, namely:

i) brahmacharya ashram
ii) grihastha ashram
iii) vanprastha ashram
iv) sanyasa ashram

It is the dharma of a Hindu to pass through these stages in one's life. The male members of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya varna are supposed to pass through these four different ashrams in their life. However, traditionally, the fourth varna, that is the Shudra and women were barred from the first ashram, that is, the brahmacharya ashram since learning of Vedas was denied to them. Recently, women have raised objection to this practice. At present most Hindus do not systematically go through these stages. Like the four varnas, the four stages of life are models. The ultimate release from the cycle of birth and rebirth comes due to one's good deeds or karma in life, which is by performing one's dharma or scared duty as members of a caste, as a family member and so on. The final release or attainment of absolute knowledge is called 'moksha'. Moksha itself is also part of a scheme of dharma, artha, kama and moksha.

b) Caste amongst the Muslims

Islam is claimed by its believers to be a religion of equality. We find that the Quran recommends the egalitarian principle but in reality there are social divisions amongst Indian Muslims. The most popularly known division among the Muslims all over the world is the division between shias and sunnis. They hold divergent views of and interpretations over Islamic texts and tradition. In India, a vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. Apart from these kind of divisions there are also other kinds of social groupings among Muslims in India, which reflect the influence of Hindu beliefs and practices specially those relating to caste system.

Muslims in India are divided into two major sections (i) those who claim to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants and (ii) those of indigenous origin whose ancestors were converted to Islam. The former section has often been called Ashraf or Shurafa (singular sharif, Arabic word meaning honourable), while the latter section does not have any specific name. In Bengal, it was designated as Ashraf (for clean occupational castes) and Arzal (for unclean castes).

1) Higher Caste (Ashraf) category of Muslim

In the Muslim social hierarchy, the descendants of immigrants from Persia, Afghanistan, Arabia and Turkistan are recognised as the highest category of Muslims in India. The Indian Muslim castes, known as Sayyed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan comprise this category.

Sayyeds are considered to have descended from Fatima's line. She was the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed. A direct descendants of the Prophet, Sayyed are accorded highest social status among the Muslims.

In the second rank of social hierarchy come the Sheikh. They are considered to be the descendants of early Muslim migrants of Mecca and Madina. The Mughal and Pathan subdivisions of the Ashraf rank third in the social hierarchy of Muslims. Both are almost equal in social status. Those who came to India with the Mughal armies and subsequently settled here, were known as the Mughal. Their main subdivisions, based on different ethnic and tribal origins are Chagtai, Uzbek, Tajik, Tukmans and Qizilbash.

The Pathans are descendants of those who migrated to Indian from Afghanistan or from the Pashto speakers of the North Western Frontier Province of Pakistan. Among the Ashraf groups are also included those pseudo - Ashrafs who claim descent from one of the Ashraf caste. Ghaus Ansari a leading socialist has given several examples of attempts by some groups for raising their social status through their claims to Ashraf descent. Ansari has given a long list of certain castes, mentioned in the 1931 census report of Uttar Pradesh. These Muslim castes have tried to raise their social status by claiming new surnames and also corresponding higher status.
2) Muslim Converts of Indian Origin

The Muslim converts of Indian origin are generally known by their caste names. In this group are placed three distinct groups, namely, converts from high caste of the Hindus, converts from clean occupational castes and converts from unclean occupational castes, such as, scavengers and people working with leather (tanners).

In the social hierarchy of the Muslims in India, converts from high castes of the Hindus are placed below the rank of Ashraf. Many of other Rajput sects (i.e. branches of a family) in north India have Muslim branches, eg. the Bais, Bhatti, Bisen, Chandel, Bargujar, Chauhan, Pawar, Rathore, Tomar. Sometimes these groups inter mix with higher ranking groups of Muslims.

By and large these converts still follow some of the Hindu practices, eg. they do not marry first cousins, either cross or parallel. Islamic law allows the marriage of near kin whereas among the Hindus of north India, prohibition regarding marriage extends to distant degrees of kinship relations both on the father's side, as well as mother's.

Unclean are those which occupy the bottom place in the Muslim social hierarchy. They are the untouchable castes of Hindus who converted to Islam and have retained their low status and poverty along with their occupation. These people do the menial tasks, including scavenging and sweeping.

Castes among the Muslims also reflect the essential features of caste system amongst the Hindus. These cultural characteristics being:

i) endogamy
ii) occupational specialisation
iii) hierarchical ordering
iv) restrictions on social intercourse and commensality.

Muslims in India use the term zat (equivalent of caste) to express the purity of descent. Thus, zat is primarily an endogamous unit of society. The households belonging to each zat in the village conceive of themselves as a collectivity and designate themselves as bhai band or biradari (literally caste brotherhood). This solidarity among the members is not merely a fictional notion, but rests on demonstrable kinship linkages.

The biradari resembles caste in the features of its inner structure, eg. membership is determined by birth and the group boundaries are maintained through endogamy. Among the Ashrafs, the caste brotherhoods are subdivided again into marriage circles to provide a restricted circle in which to choose a wife, whereas the Biradari generally functions for all ceremonial intercourse, the marriage circles within the Biradari is restricted to the choosing of wives. The Muslim Rajputs are very endogamous but do not marry first cousins as Ashrafs do. Occupational castes like Qasab (butcher), Manihar (bangle maker) are almost strictly endogamous and generally do not marry outside their castes.

These various castes have a definite place in their local marriage is restricted within their own groups. However, there are no restrictions on interdining or concept of purity and pollution.

c) Castes among the Christians

The Christians in India, believe that when they converted from Hinduism to Christianity, they were forced to break away from their original caste group. However, their caste status is maintained by them because they are careful to behave in certain ways which are in keeping with caste defined behaviour. They maintain the traditional boundaries and distances between high and low castes, even though this is against the moral law of Christian life.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe that their ancestors were Brahmins who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, a follower and friend of Jesus Christ. St Thomas came to Kerala in 52 A.D. Syrian Christians enjoy high social status and marry amongst their own community.

Like the Hindus, Christians too have faith in horoscopes, tie the tali or marriage locket and observe death pollution and follow many of the Hindu customs and traditions.
Besides the Hindus, Muslims and Christians, other religions too have caste-like elements in them such as, Sikhism, which is a religion founded by Guru Nanak and believes in the fundamental equality of all men and women. It is against the caste system which was based on inequality. However, in practice, we find social divisions between them which are made evident in terms of marriage with in one's caste.

6.3.3 Concept of Class

Class has been defined as a kind of social group which is neither legally defined nor religiously sanctioned. It is a stratum of people occupying similar social and economic position. Wealth, education, income and occupation are some of the basic determinants of class. It is relatively open, i.e. any one who satisfies the basic criteria can become its member. There are several classes in a society, hierarchically ranked primarily in terms of wealth and income. The differences in wealth and income are expressed in terms of different life styles and consumption patterns.

6.3.4 Classes in India

Social classes are the characteristic features of industrial societies. Class in India, as we see them today had their genesis during the colonial rule. This is not to say that the class phenomenon was absent in the pre-British Indian society. The class dimension of Indian society was only less pronounced than it turned out to be during the British period.

The self-sufficiency of the village community, the building block of the Indian society, was one of the reasons behind it as mentioned at the beginning of the unit. The village community produced only what was required for the consumption needs of the village. There was hence, little surplus and as a result very little differentiation in terms of class among the village population.

Even when there was a marked class dimension, it 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 distinct from the subjects over whom they ruled. The courtiers comprised the Zamindars, Jagirdars and so on. They alongwith 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, merchants, artisans and specialists of various kinds.

The colonial rule in India proved to be a turning point in the Indian history. It introduced new elements which led to some radical changes in the structure of Indian society. Now let us examine the change and continuity in India which was brought about by the impact of the colonial rule. The colonial rule led to the changes in the class formation in India; the rise of National Movement and finally, some of the crucial social problems that India is facing today.

Check Your Progress-2

1) Define the concept of caste.

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2) Describe the characteristics of caste amongst the Muslims.

3) Fill in the blanks:
   a) Caste is a closed system of stratification as compared with ____________.
   b) The practice of marriage within one's own social group is called _________.
   c) One of the major determinants of class is ____________.

6.4 CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN INDIA

Here we will first discuss the impact of colonial period on the social structure

6.4.1 Impact of Colonial Rule

The emergence of new social classes in India was the consequence of far reaching changes brought about by the British in the economic structure of India. The first change they brought about was in the area of agriculture. The British administration revolutionised the existing land revenue system. It did away with the traditional rights of the village community over the village land. Instead it created individual ownership rights in land by introducing certain measures during the 18th century, such as, the permanent settlement, the Ryotwari settlement and the Mahalwari settlement. With this land became a private property, a commodity in the market. It could be mortgaged, purchased or sold.

Till the village ownership of land existed, the village was the unit of assessment. The new land revenue system eliminated the village as the unit. It introduced the system of individual land assessment and revenue payment. Previously, revenue was fixed at a specific portion of the year's actual produce. This was replaced by a system of fixed money payment irrespective of crops. The Mughal system of revenue on crop was replaced with tax on land. The landlord or cultivator was hence forced to meet this demand. Further, the payment of revenue in cash gave way to production of cash crops in place of food crops.

A new class of land owners, was created whose interest in the land was confined to collection of rents. There were several landlords who never stayed in the village but owned land. They were called absentee landlords. A whole structure of landlords i.e. the Zamindars, tenants, subtenants and agricultural labourers existed and depended on the land. This structure varied from region to region depending on the owners, the intermediaries and tillers of the land during the colonial period.

However, with the expanding railway and transport system production for market became fairly well established. This commercialisation of agriculture, in turn, stimulated the growth of trade and commerce in India.

Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce were centred around two things - i) supply of raw materials for industries in Britain and ii) procuring British manufactured goods for consumption in India. The latter aspect had a disastrous effect on town and village handicrafts. The indigenous handicraft items could not face the competition from the British manufactured goods which were machine made and products of their industries. Thus, the indigenous village and town handicrafts got disintegrated. Artisans lost their livelihoods and some migrated to the cities, some fell back on agriculture which in turn led to mass impoverisation.
The Expanding of Railways and Roads

The expansion of railways was done 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 for establishment of law and order. The investment of British capital found an outlet initially in such spheres as plantation (indigo, tea), cotton, jute and mining industries. This was the beginning of the industrialisation 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 industries owned by Indians in some cases.

State and Administrative System

To deal with all these aspects of Indian social reality, the British government had organised a huge and extensive state machinery to administer the conquered territory. The Civil Services, which exists even today was created by the British to deal with the task of Civil Administration. It initially had British officers but later as the number of educated Indians increased, it came to be manned by Indians. It was not possible for the British to secure staff of educated people from Britain for running such a huge administrative machinery. Therefore, they introduced Western education in India to primarily serve their own needs.

Thus, schools, colleges and universities were established to impart Western education to the Indians. As a consequence, the Indian society experienced an uneven growth of social classes.

Uneven Growth of Social Classes in India

Social forces which developed during the colonial period spread both in time and tempo unevenly giving rise to uneven growth of social classes. The reason for uneven impact of British rule was because their political power spread unevenly. For example, it was in Bengal that the two classes of Zamindars and tenants came into existence first. Again it was in Bengal and Bombay that the first industrial enterprises started. This led to the emergence of the class of industrialists and workers in this region. It was for this reason that the British established a complex administrative system and introduced modern education first in Bengal and Bombay.

Along with the above developments, the rise of new social classes was also uneven in different communities as well. This was due to the fact that certain communities were already engaged in definite economic, social or educational vocations in pre-British period. For example, Baniyas were traders by vocation in our traditional social structure. Hence, they were the first to take up modern commerce, banking and industrial enterprises. Similarly, Brahmins were the first to take up modern education and enter professional classes. These communities took up the new challenges and entered these spheres of activity first because they already possessed the basic disposition towards these occupations. Thus, on the eve of Independence, we find that Indian social structure was made up of innumerable castes and classes. In some cases, these coincided with each other but in some they did not.

6.4.2 Rise of the Indian National Movement

In the 19th century and the early parts of the 20th century, the middle classes began to think in terms of reforming and modernising Indian society. The reformist attempts contained both religious and social components. The political movement for freedom began only at the end of the 19th century. But social reality being inter-related and complex; the rise of the new educated middle class, the reformist and revivalist movements had a very close connection with the later political movement for Independence from British rule.

The Reformist Movements

One of the early 19th century reformers was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) of Bengal who believed that Indians could become progressive if they shed the superstitious and evil practices, such as Sati, infanticide, etc. He advanced a new kind of religion which combined Christian teachings with Vedanta. He founded the Brahma Samaj which was meant to be a spiritual forum, where a monotheistic, non- idolatrous worship could be conducted by its members who had nothing to do with caste or superstition. Ram Mohan Roy's influence was mainly confined to urban literate groups of Bengal.
In the same century, Mahadev Govind Ranade, a jurist of Maharashtra, founded the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay. This was broadly modelled on the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal. The social reactions raised by the two movements were, however, quite different. The Brahmo Samaj by its insistence on reforms was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindus led by Radha Kant Dev and others. Here was a confrontation between tradition and modernity. By contrast, the liberal trends initiated by Prarthana Samaj, did not create a direct conflict between tradition and modernity. Unlike the members of Brahmo Samaj, its members did not lead a distinctive, anti-traditionalist life style. So, there was no sharp reaction from the society in Maharashtra. Apart from these social reform endeavours, there also existed strong movements of protests by lower caste groups against the upper caste domination. Western and South India were the strongholds of such protests. People like Jyoti Rao Govind Rao, Phule took the initiative in leading such movements.

The Revivalist Movement

Revivalist movements began as a measure of self-assertion, search for identity and revival of lost honour as perceived by its people.

The Arya Samaj launched by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) was based on an appeal to people to shed the unhealthy features of Hinduism (such as, caste orthodoxy, superstition, ritualism, etc.) and go back to the pristine purity of Vedas. It sponsored a kind of education which had both traditional and modern components. The DAV (Dayanand Anglo Vedic) Colleges spread education in north India on a wide scale.

There was another revivalist movement which became popular during the same century. This was the Ramakrishna Mission founded by Vivekanand after his religious Guru Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. This mission had two purposes.

- First, to make educated people in India realise their responsibility to the weaker sections, and take steps to remove poverty and social backwardness.
- Secondly, to propagate Indian Vedanta to the Westerners.

In order to achieve the first, many schools and hostels were founded in urban, rural and tribal areas to improve education and employment prospects of common people. With regard to the second, Advaita centres were established in many Western countries to bring about spiritual awakening among the Western people.

Movement for Independence

Towards the end of the 19th century a political movement for the attainment of Independence arose. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 by A.O. Hume and its main purpose was to establish a political forum for debates and discussions.

Most members of the Congress were drawn from urban, literate groups. Its essentially middle class character persisted from 1885 till 1918. With the coming of M.K. Gandhi on the political scene, the Congress became a mass political organisation in which primary members were drawn from urban professional groups, peasants, artisans and industrial workers.

Numerous Congress leaders and followers went to prison under the charge of sedition during the Swadeshi Movement (1905), Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) and Quit India Movement (194). Several people were also executed for their participation in terrorist activities. However, the distinctive mark of the Indian struggle for Independence was its non-violent character.

The socio-religious movements indirectly contributed to political movements through education and reforms. The former type of movement induced self-confidence, while the latter type created a political consciousness. Thus, the two type of movements were complementary developments in Indian Society.

6.4.3 Independent India and its Social Problems

India acquired Independence on the historic day of 15th August, 1947 and its constitution was framed on the lines of British Constitution, except that unlike the British, Indian Constitution is written.
The initial period of self-governance was tumultuous as India was socially, politically and economically in a distraught condition. India and Pakistan had emerged as two nations. Partition had taken place; communal riots were rampant. Society was trying to gear towards a new meaningful existence.

The policy makers of independent India should be credited with initiating the following measures:

- abolition of untouchability through constitutional intervention,
- a policy of reservation for depressed castes in the government jobs and legislatures as a part of the policy of protective discrimination, and
- ensuring religious freedom and protecting the rights of various minority groups.

All these principles of social justice were guaranteed through the constitution. The efforts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Nehru and others were noteworthy in incorporating them into the constitution.

The kind of social problems that still persist in India, inspite of rapid changes and growth in its economy, technology and access to new opportunities are related to:

i) problem of poverty - both absolute and relative; and

ii) rise in population, despite tremendous economic development.

Poverty and rise of population are inter-related phenomenon and form a vicious circle.

Government has made several attempts through Five Year Plans; Welfare Schemes, etc. to remove poverty. Even today family planning schemes exist, although the focus is now being placed on the care of mother and child rather than control of population alone. This is being done, as research has proved a close relation between education and rise of population; and also there is a direct relationship between infant mortality and rise of population. Thus, education of women, care of mother and child is viewed as a way of controlling population.

There are some new problems also arising today as a result of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. These are the growth of slums in cities, rise of unemployment, crime in urban areas, delinquency, dowry deaths, etc.

Thus, we see that society in India has changed in many respects yet the traditional roots of caste and ethnic identities, social and political culture continue.

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Check Your Progress-3

1) In what way are the castes and classes in India related with each other. Discuss in about 10 lines.

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2) Who founded the Brahmo Samaj and what were its basic ideas?

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3) Match the following:

A. Raja Ram Mohan Roy  
B. Mahadev Govind Ranade  
C. A.O. Hume  
D. Dayanand Saraswati

1. Indian National Congress  
2. Brahmo Samaj  
3. Arya Samaj  
4. Prarthana Samaj

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6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you first learnt about the society in India from a historical perspective. You learnt about the difference between the pre-colonial India and colonial India and learnt how prior to the British the village autonomy was not disturbed inspite of different conquests, socio-religious upheavals, etc. In the post-colonial period with the emergence of the middle class, the new aspirations and opportunities for social mobility developed.

In the Section on caste and class in India we described the concept of caste; its various features and its existence in different religious communities in India. We also defined the concept of class and described the nature of classes in India.

Finally, in the Section on change and continuity in India, the impact of the British on Indian society has been outlined. We have described the rise of National Movement in India along with socio-religious and political movements. The social problems related with poverty, rise of population and aspirations of its people have been touched upon in this Unit.

6.6 KEY WORDS

Endogamy : It is the custom of marrying within one’s own social group, such as the caste group.

Permutations : The number of ways in which a social group, like a caste group can be arranged.

Purity and Pollution : It is an abstract notion which considers certain activities, objects and occupations ritually pure or polluting in the caste society. For example, vegetarianism is considered ritually purer than non-vegetarianism. Both these concepts are relative to each other.

Twice-born : The castes belonging to the first three Varna i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya, whose male members undergo the thread ceremony called the “Upayana Samskara.” They are called "twice-born" or "dwija" because members of these castes are considered to be blessed with both physical, as well as spiritual birth.

Social Stratification : It is the process of differential ranking where a society is divided in segments and these segments are hierarchically ranked.

Protective Discrimination : It refers to the policy of the state to safeguard and promote the interest of the backward classes of population by giving protection to them. This is expressed in state policy of reservation of seats, jobs in education, services and legislature for the scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes. The terms “affirmative action,” “reverse discrimination” and “comparative discrimination” are also used.

Social Mobility : The process of shifting of social position by individuals or social groups in the social hierarchy is called social mobility. It could be both upward or downward and also vertical or horizontal i.e. in case it is more from a social position to another which has equal status.
6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

1) The most distinctive feature of colonial period as against the pre-colonial period was that for once the self-sufficiency of the village unit was disturbed. Due to the introduction of a new kind of land revenue collection system, the British turned land into a commodity which could be bought, mortgaged or sold in the market. Also see Sub-sec. 6.2.1.

2) Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent settlement in the region of Bengal, United Provinces and some other regions in 1793.

Check Your Progress-2

1) Caste is a system of social stratification which is close ended where membership is restricted to those born in that social group. It is hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised and has a traditional association with an occupation. Also see Sub-sec. 6.3.1.

2) The various castes, both of the immigrants called Ashrafs and clean and unclean castes of Indian converts reflect the main characteristic of caste. These caste groups are ordered hierarchically, endogamous, maximum social intercourse takes place within the social group. Also see Sub-sec. 6.3.2.

3) a. class
   b. endogamy
   c. wealth and income

Check Your Progress-3

1) In the pre-colonial period the upper castes were generally speaking also the upper classes in terms of wealth, income, power and status. After the arrival of British and the impact of their rule this overlap of caste and classes in India became comparatively less. Education, income, status became disassociated from caste position. But still, it has been found that those castes which had a traditional inclination towards an occupation, such as, learning and professions of Brahmins entered it first. Also see Section 6.4

2) Brahmo Samaj was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1722-1833) and it tried to combine Christian teachings with Vedanta. It was against superstitious worship of idols and believed in one God. It tried to abolish sati (practice of burning the widow along with her husbands corpse), infanticide, etc.

3) A. 2
   B. 4
   C. 1
   D. 3