UNIT 11: RURAL LIFE IN INDIA

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- know about Indian villages and its characteristics
- explain Agrarian society and its structure
- learn about the land reforms and its changes today

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The places where humans live can be divided into two sections—rural and urban. This has been the fundamental division to study Indian society. Indian village is considered to be the entry point to study any traditional society in India. In India, in spite of the growth of cities, a huge population of the country lives in the villages and are engaged in agricultural activities. The Indian village symbolises tradition, a native life that is far away from the complex urban city. They are the earliest of the communities that are less organised with very few families dependent on each other. They carry out inter dependent activities in gathering food and agriculture.

In the previous units we have learned about the nature and evolution of Indian Economy and Polity. In this unit we shall discuss in details about Rural Life in India.

11.3 EVOLUTION OF INDIAN VILLAGES

The emergence of village and its settled community signified that human beings have transformed from nomadic life to a settled one. Generally the term 'village' is defined as a small area with a small number of population that follows mostly agriculture. Here, agriculture is not only an occupation but also a way of life. Every member of the village is engaged with agriculture in their own small farms.

The village community has passed through various stages:

- **Primitive village community**—— the primitive village community consists of fifteen to twenty families. Owing to small number of families, they were bound to know each other. In primitive village community, the land was commonly used by the community. The village was organised on the collective basis. Everyone trusted each other and depended on one another. There was a high level of 'we-feeling' and a bond of commonness.
- **Medieval village community**— the primitive village community changed during the medieval period. The feudal system came into existence. Members of families increased thus leading to increase in population in the community. Land was divided among different groups of people. With feudalism, came the relation of the kings or the lords and serfs. Occupation was divided and whatever was tilled in the fields had to be given to the lords.
- **Modern village community**— With the rise of industrialisation, the rural group lost its importance. The modern village community stands in sharp contrast to the primitive one. With the emergence of technology and development of communication facilities, these villages are no more far away from the urban centres. Agricultural goods are brought and sold in the cities and nearby towns. Moreover, with the increase in population in the village communities, the kinship bond has become weak as compared to the earlier stages.

11.3.1 Characteristics of an Indian village

- **Self Sufficient—** Indian villages are described as self sufficient communities. Since they were initially not connected with other parts of the society, all the essential needs were produced by the villagers themselves.
- **Homogeneity**— The village community is mostly homogeneous. They live a simple life with common interests. There are various similarities in their life style, eating habits, behavour etc.
- **Primary group**— Indian villages are known for their primary relations. As these villages are small in number of communities, people know each other. Thus, they are dependent on each other and also work for the welfare of the people. One can find a sense of belongingner in a village community, which is not possible in urban cities.
- **Caste system**— Indian villages are known for its caste system. This is a rigid social institution that decides the fate of the villagers. Through this institution, the status and the occupational role of the people are decided in the villages. This caste system stratifies the society based on the customs and traditions.
- **The internal organisation**— Every village have their own internal organisation that controls the activities of the village. Every village has a head man or panchayat who is elected from among the adult members of the village. The governing body has its responsibility to keep the order of the village. They also help in solving various social, political or economic issues of the villagers.
- **Joint family**—— It is one of the important characteristics of an Indian village. Families in Indian villages are known for their cohesiveness. They stand together for their family. Even after marriage, sons are likely to live with their parents. Thus two or three generations live together as a part of a family in villages. According to various sociologists, family is the smallest unit and not the individual. Thus, individual choices are not taken for consideration.

- **Faiths in religion**—— People in villages are religious in nature. They have faith in religion and God. Even to begin a new occupation, they pray to God for the success. Their faith in God, however, sometimes makes them believe in various superstitions.
- **Marriages**— In villages, marriages are mostly exogamous (in terms of community) and endogamous (in terms of caste). No one is allowed to marry within their same village. However, they cannot marry outside their caste system. All villagers are strict in endogamous marriage rules.

Now, rural societies are mostly agrarian in nature. People belonging to the village are mostly engaged in agricultural activities. Thus, they are also known as agrarian societies.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What are the three stages of evolution of an Indian village?

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Q2: What does an Indian village symbolise?

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11.4 AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

During the later Vedic Phase, with the invention of plough, agriculture became one of the sources of livelihood for the people. The wooden plough was used to cultivate crops along with the cattle. Thus, agrarian societies are those societies whose primary means of livelihood is the cultivation of crops using a mixture of human and non-human means (i.e., animals and/or machinery). Here, agriculture is the process of producing food, feed, fiber, and other desired products by the cultivation of plants and the raising of domesticated animals. Some of the characteristics of agrarian society are:

- Agrarian societies are mostly involved in cultivation of land through plough. They also use animals to help them in cultivating the field.
- There is an increase in the size of the society as compared to pastoral communities. It relieves the burden of working in the field for a fairly large number of people who can engage themselves in other activities.
- In agrarian communities, there is an emergence of elaborate political institutions. Here power is concentrated in a single individual. Thus, a hereditary monarchy tends to emerge.
- Evolution of distinct social classes is also seen in these communities. As land, which is the major source of wealth, is divided unequally among all the villagers, there is also emergence of division of class and power. This indicates the beginning of social stratification.
- There is also emergence of clearly defined economic institutions. Here, trade becomes more adequate and money becomes the medium of exchange. Different rules and regulations are maintained to carry on with the trade and to make profit.
- Religion becomes a separate institution in agrarian societies. As the societies are becoming more complex, religion is more attached together with the state. Instead, it has become a different institution with different religious body to look after it.

11.4.1 Agrarian Class structure

Unlike simple societies, which use their simple tools to hunt and gather food, agrarian societies are different. Agrarian societies emerged with the invention of new tools like plough and other efficient technology that helped them in making surplus in agriculture. Now, this surplus created a class structure in an agrarian society. The surplus that is created in agricultural process is appropriated by those who acquire property rights and land and also the right to employ others.

According to sociologists like Andre Beteille in his book “Agrarian Social Relations”, agrarian economy can be understood

only by understanding the social framework of an agricultural society because the economy is not independent of society but is part of it. Now, agricultural activities involve a social organisation of rights and obligations, e.g., those of landlord and tenants or landlord and labourers. These are basically class relationships between the one who owns the land and the other who works for the land holder. Although there are caste relations in agricultural society, but one can see that the class structure is an important part of an agricultural society. However, both the caste and class overlap each other. For Beteille, the agrarian society in India can be understood both in terms of class as well as caste and there is a two fold link between caste and class.

- Firstly, class relations are legitimised and sanctioned by the caste system. People who belong to upper caste resist themselves from working in their own lands. Instead they use labours or people from lower caste to do that job.
- Secondly there is a direct link between caste and class as the upper castes such as Brahmins and Rajputs were traditionally land owners, the middle castes were traditionally tenants and the lower castes or untouchables were labourers.

Now, in India since agriculture is an important economic activity, the understanding of land and property becomes important. As India was colonised, the colonialists started to plunder the agricultural structure in the society through monopoly of trade and land revenue system. In traditional Indian method, land revenue was collected as a fixed part of the produce of the land either directly by the officials of the state or indirectly through tax farmers, who kept part of the produce for themselves and deposited the rest with the state. Land was owned by the community and they could not be driven out of the land even if they failed to pay the tax. Moreover, the land revenue was not paid in cash instead it was the part of the produce that was paid to the state. However, the British land revenue system was far different from the traditional one. They brought

various changes in the Indian agricultural system which created havoc and disturbances in the peasant society. The British introduced two main land revenue systems:

- Zamindari system —— this land revenue system was for the Zamindars or the owners of the land. They were considered as commodities and were asked to pay fix tax which was higher than the traditional Indian system. The British even refused to make allowances during drought, flood or other natural disaster. This was introduced by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 by Lord Cornwallis who declared that land was transferable from the cultivator if he fails to pay the tax. Thus land became a property that can be sold, bought and mortgaged in the market.
- Ryotwari System—— This system that was introduced in some parts of British India by 1820 and was used to collect revenues from the cultivators directly. However, the amount of revenues included undifferentiated land taxes and rents, collected simultaneously. Thus, the system in places where land revenue was imposed directly on the cultivators or the one who tilted the lands was called ryotwari system. The *Ryotwari* system is associated with the name of Sir Thomas Munro, who was appointed Governor of Madras in May 1820. Subsequently, the *ryotwari* system was extended to the Mumbai area under the supervision of Thomas Reid.

In this way the British introduced the agrarian class structure in India. Thus the following classes existed in the agrarian structure prior to the introduction of land reform in 1950. T.K Oommen lists the following five categories:

- **Landlords** who own the land but do not cultivate land. They employ intermediaries or lease out the land.
- **Rich farmers** who look upon agriculture as a business product. They produce for the market and think about the profit they can incur from it. However, they do not cultivate themselves and are more involved in supervising the cultivators.

- **Middle peasants** who cultivate their own land and employ workers only for particular purposes.
- **Poor peasants** who own small amount of land, and have to work on their own as labourers or tenants.
- **Landless agricultural workers** who sell their labour and are fully depended on the previous categories for their livelihood.

However, in majority of rural areas, classes consist primarily of the following categories:

- **Landlords**— the British administration made various types of land settlements such as Zamindari settlement, Ryotwari settlement with the natives. Under the Zamindari settlement, a new class of land lords emerged in the Indian society. After the settlement took place, land was permanently owned by the Zamindars and was inherited hereditarily by the family members.
- **Peasant Proprietors**— with the introduction of Ryotwari system, the ownership of land was vested in the peasants. The actual cultivators had to pay the revenue. Here, the cultivators came in direct contact with the State and hence reduced the oppression of the landlords. These thus gave rise to the class of peasant proprietors. In this process, a few mobilised themselves to rise up the hierarchy.
- **Tenants**— The creation of the Zamindari system transformed the owner cultivators of Pre British India into a class of tenants. The Zamindars resorted to the practice of extracting land as well as rent from these tenants. Those who failed to pay had to give away their land to the zamindars.
- **Agricultural labourers**— Along with the rent paying tenants, there was rise of another category of agricultural labourers. With the growing indebtedness among peasant population, land alienation and displacement of the villagers, resulted in the growth of agricultural labourers. While some of the labourers held a small amount of land, others had to depend on their productivity of their labour. There was also the category of bonded labour.

- **Artisans**— In rural areas the class of artisans form an integral part of the village community. These categories of people existed since the simple society was in formation and contributed to the self sufficiency of the village.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3 : What is the primary means of livelihood for the agricultural society?

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Q4 : Name the land revenue system that the British introduced?

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11.5 LAND REFORMS IN INDIA AND ITS CHANGES

Land reform was a part of the pre-independence nationalist movement which consisted in providing certain securities to land tenants, providing them the right to ownership and implement policies towards ceilings on landholdings. It is basically defined as the distribution of land in equal terms legally. It includes how operation, ownership and inheritance of land can be regulated. In an agrarian country like India where land is divided unequally, where the rich has more land than the poor, land reforms are important. This reform process continued after independence with the gradual development of land reform legislations in the states.

After India got its independence from the British rule, the question of land reform or freedom from taxpaying system was important. That became the major agenda during the period of independence. Years after independence, different land reform legislations were passed. Here, the most common argument in favour of land reform was distribution of equal land to all. In a country like India, where majority of people live in rural areas and are involved in agriculture, a minimum amount of land is required by all.

Hence, the question of land reform became important. Thus various acts and legislations were enacted in order to provide certain rights to the tenants and give them ownership of land.

11.5.1 Land Reforms in post independence period

Various land reform initiatives were taken by the Union Government and the State Governments since independence. The first Five Year Plan (1951-56) has developed a broad approach towards land reforms in India. This was a step by step approach to deal with the problems of land and tax collection. Some of the features of the approach were :

- Abolition of intermediaries who were rent collectors under the pre-Independence land revenue system—— The Five Year plan suggested some of the developing mechanism that can help in abolishing the intermediaries. At the time of Independence there were various categories of the land which was under direct control of land intermediaries: (a) Village land, forest land; (b) Land on which the intermediaries had right to either cultivate or let it out to others, (c) Land other than home-farms under the control of intermediaries for personal cultivation; (d) Land held by the tenants directly from the intermediaries, and (e) Land held by sub-tenants. Thus, in order to free the tenants from these intermediaries, various steps were taken by the Government.
- Tenancy regulation that attempts to improve the contractual terms faced by tenants, including crop shares and security of tenure—— Because of the Zamindari and Ryotwari systems, there were various factors that created problem for the tenants in cultivating in their own fields. These were: a) Land intermediary's took very little interest in cultivation of land marked for personal cultivation and they preferred leasing these lands to tenants. b) Landholdings to tenants were leased to sub-tenants. c) In the ryotwari areas and areas of peasant proprietorship, land was actually cultivated by the tenants. Thus to overcome these kinds of problems, the following set of actions were suggested:

- **Rent Regulation of the Land:** The Plan recommended that rent of the land should not exceed 1/4th or l/5th of the total produce from the land under consideration. However, rent variation was between 1/4th and 1/3rd in different states.
- **Security of Land Tenure:** The security of the tenure of the land for tenants was linked with the owner's right to resume the land for personal cultivation. To overcome this, the Plan suggested that permanent and heritage rights be given to the tenants. The land lord can own a limited amount of land. However, the rest was left for the tenants to share.

11.5.2 Current scenario of Land reforms in India

In the earlier section, we saw how the first Five Year plan started the initiative of land reforms. This was one of the most appreciated steps towards the development of an agricultural society. However, the failure of the first round of land reforms to remove the unequal power structure in the villages caused a lot of discontent among the poor. Besides, the green revolution in the late 1960s further widened the income gap between the have's and the have not's. In fact, the growing discontent led to land conflicts, including naxalite movement in West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of the country. These developments forced the government to revise the ceiling laws in the early 1970s. In addition there were also other improvements taken in land reforms legislation. They were Tenants, Rights over Landholdings, Ceiling on the Excessive Land, and Consolidation of Landholdings, and Computerization of Land Records.

- Ownership rights to the tenants— The tenants are given the ownership rights. They cannot be evicted from their land and has full right to cultivate in their own lands.
- Ceiling Surplus Land— According to Government records, there is surplus amount of land in each state. Hence, the process of ceiling those lands by the government has been initiated.

- Consolidation of land holding—— Every Five Year plan put emphasis on consolidating different fragmented agricultural landholdings as its integral part. This is done to develop agricultural economy of the villages.
- Computerization of land records— Computerization of land records (CLR) was started in 1988-89 as a central scheme. This project was taken to solve the problem of maintaining records manually.
- Land rights for Women— Earlier, land reforms did not include the rights of women. In some states, women were not allowed to buy any land. Thus, in 1992, it was recommended that women should be given equal opportunities in terms of land holding. The land can be jointly shared by husband and wife.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

- The Indian village symbolises tradition, a native life that is far away from the complex urban city. They are the earliest of the communities that are less organised with very few families dependent on each other.
- Generally the term 'village' is defined as a small area with a small number of populations that follows mostly agriculture.
- The village community has passed through various stages: Primitive, medieval and modern village community.
- Indian villages have various characteristics— Self Sufficient, homogeneity, primary group, caste system, internal organisation, joint family, faith in religion, marriages, conservatism.
- During the later Vedic Phase, with the invention of plough, agriculture became one of the processes of livelihood for the people. The wooden plough was used to cultivate crops along with the cattle.
- According to sociologist like Andre Beteille in his book "Agrarian Social Relations", agrarian economy can be understood only by understanding the social framework of an agricultural society because the economy is not independent of society but is part of it.

- For Beteille, the agrarian society in India can be understood both in terms of class as well as caste and there is twofold link between caste and class. Firstly, class relations are legitimised and sanctioned by the caste system. Secondly there is a direct link between caste and class as the upper castes such as Brahmins and Rajputs were traditionally land owners, the middle castes were traditionally tenants and the lower castes or untouchables are labourers.
- Now, in India since agriculture is an important economic activity, the understanding of land property becomes important. As India was colonised, the colonialists started to plunder the agricultural structure in the society through monopoly of trade and land revenue system.
- The British land revenue system was far different from the traditional one. They brought various changes in the Indian agricultural system which created havoc and disturbances in the peasant society. The British introduced two main land revenue systems: Zamindari system and Ryotwari System.
- Land reform was a part of the pre-independence nationalist movement which consisted of providing certain securities to land tenants, providing them the right to ownership and implement policies towards ceilings on landholdings.
- The failure of the first round of land reforms to remove the unequal power structure in the villages caused a lot of discontent among the poor. These developments forced the government to revise the ceiling laws as well as tenant laws in the early 1970s.



11.7 FURTHER READING

1) Joshi, P.C. Land Reforms in India, in A. R Desai *Rural Sociology in India*, pp. 445-475.

2) Thorner, Daniel. (1976). *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt Ltd.

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No.1: Primitive village community, Medieval village community and Modern village community

Ans to Q No.2: The Indian village symbolises tradition, a native life that is far away from the complex urban city.

Ans to Q No.3: The primary means of livelihood for an agricultural society is the cultivation of crops using man and cattle.

Ans to Q No.4: Zamindari system and Ryotwari system.



11.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Answer in one or two words:

Q1 : In which year was first five year plan introduced ?

Q2 : Name any book written by Andre Beteille?

Q3 : Write two characteristics of an Indian village?



B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words):

Q1 : Describe Zamindari system and Ryotwari system.

Q2 : Explain the land reforms taken after 1970s in India?

Q3 : What are the characteristics of agrarian societies?

C) Long answer type questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q1 : Write in detail the characteristics of an Indian village?

Q2 : Explain the agrarian class structure in detail.

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