UNIT 10: MODE OF PRODUCTION IN PEASANT SOCIETY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- understanding the meaning and definition of peasant society
- know the characteristics of peasant society
- know about the systems of production, circulation and consumption of peasant society.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

The word peasant or peasant class basically depicts the picture of an agrarian society where the prime source of their livelihood is based on agriculture. It can also be understood as the pre-industrialist society.

In the context of India the peasant society has a very significant role. In India more than 60% of land is used for the agricultural purpose. In most parts of India, even in present times, the peasant class has less access towards the modern sophisticated machineries. The human labour power is the main source which is engaged in the cultivation fields. Most of this working force is basically the family members.

The peasant society and the peasant class is one of the vulnerable sections of India that face oppression and exploitation in various ways. The peasant society of India has been going through a number of changes since the colonial era. Imposition of tax in the peasant's agricultural lands and crops, policies to ruin the traditional handicrafts etc. led to numerous peasant movements in India. Few examples of peasant movement of India are: Tebhaga movement of Bengal, peasant revolt in Telengana, Phulaguri uprising of Assam and so on. Many social scientists like; D DKosambi, Daniel Thorner etc. had conducted very significant study on the peasants and peasant society of India.

10.3 PEASANT SOCIETY

10.3.1 Meaning and Definition

The English used the word 'peasant' to describe the common people and brought under that umbrella the agricultural labourers. In countries like France and Germany the word 'peasant' acquired a derogatory overtone. Cultivation has always been an integral part of Indian system and has existed since the times of the Indus Valley Civilization. This is carried out mainly by the peasant class. The concept of peasantry has been explored by various scholars and different definitions have evolved over the years.

According to scholar George Dalton, "Peasants were legal, political, social, and economic inferiors in medieval Europe. The structured subordination of peasants to nonpeasants was expressed in many ways, de jure and de facto, from restraints on their physical movement to sumptuary restrictions on what kinds of weapons, clothing and adornments they could wear and use, and foods they could legally consume."

According to Teodor Shanin, the renowned peasant studies scholar, peasantry has four essential and inter-linked facets; the family farm as the basic multi-functional unit of social organisation, land husbandry and usually animal rearing as the main means of livelihood, a specific traditional culture closely linked with the way of life of small rural communities and multi-directional subjection to powerful outsiders (Shanin, 1973).

10.3.2 Characteristics

Theodor Shanin (1972), had given very significant characteristics of the peasant society in his study. These characteristics also fit in the picture of an Indian peasant society. The basic characteristics of the peasant society have been mentioned below;

- According to Shanin when he studied the Russian peasant household, he found that, the majority of them were blood relatives and two to three generations stayed together. This scenario is also applicable in the Indian context. In India, the peasant families were found living under the same room. To fulfil the need of human labour and to avoid expenses were some of the main reasons for this.
- The Peasant Society is basically patriarchal in nature. The head of the family is basically the father or the oldest kin- member.
- According to Shanin, a new member can also become a part of a family with the help of adoption and marriage.
- In a peasant society, household is the basic unit of production, consumption, property holding, socialization, moral support and mutual economic help.
- The peasant household operated as a highly cohesive unit of social organization with basic division of labour.
- The agriculture is based on old techniques and conventional types of equipments.
- The peasant society is basically pre-industrial rural society.
- In due course of time migration of the peasants from rural to urban area has been identified. Development of urban industries and seeking occupation in the urban areas are considered as the main reasons of this migration.

  Scholar Eric Woolf has also given some features of the peasant society. They are:

- Closed peasant societies: In these societies, outsiders are unwelcome and the membership of the community is closely defined. They live in poverty and Woolf called it "defensive ignorance"; they

remain uneducated in order to protect their traditional way of life. Their culture discourages the accumulation and display of wealth; those who manage to accumulate some wealth are pressurised to return to the economic level of everyone else by sharing with relatives or by spending their accumulations on community events.

- Open peasant societies: These societies arose in response to the increasing demand around the world for crops that could be readily sold for cash, as a product of the rise of Capitalism. An open peasant society is therefore geared to a national or international economy and the peasants may sell half or more of what they produce rather than use it themselves. They own their land and sometimes borrow money, although on a small scale. They are much more integrated into the larger society, and welcome changes from the outside.
- Status of women is usually low, perhaps because peasant women typically work in the domestic sphere rather than outside it.

10.3.3 Systems of production, circulation and consumption

The basic production system of the peasant society is based on agriculture in both settled and shifting form based on traditional use of equipments primarily with the involvement of family members. In most parts of India settled system of cultivation has been prevailing, whereas in the hilly region of the country few communities practice shifting cultivation. Few states of North East India practice shifting cultivation in present time.

We mostly refer the rural communities as the peasants. These people engage in part-time or full-time farming activities with a mode of agricultural production distinct from that of other farms (such as commercial, smallholder family or co-operative farms) with multiple economic activities which are predominantly in small scale (often household) activities and enterprises in the informal economy. These activities are mostly dependent on the family labour and little use of capital. Human labour power and the animals are basic reliable sources of the production system. The distinctive features of poor rural people's activities require analysis of the livelihoods of these people

using different techniques from those generally used in analyzing commercial agricultural or non-agricultural enterprises in the formal sector. Along with dependency on family labour and age old technical equipments, the system of production of the peasant societies also rely on natural resources like river and fertile soil. Changes in the climate also impacted upon the production system of the society. For example, heavy rainfall or dryness in the weather affect the conditions of production. These factors can be considered as the reasons for the poor and vulnerable condition of the peasants.

The peasant society and its economic system are basically primitive in nature and as a result of this peasant society is different from the other societies. Therefore, to understand the systems of production, circulation and consumption pattern in a peasant society, the features mentioned below must be considered.

- Technological Complexity and Division of Labour

  It is one of the most distinct features that describe the system of production in a peasant society. Being a follower of primitive system in the field of agriculture, the peasants are relatively simple in the field of technology. Their indigenous system of production required a huge amount of labour power but with simple level of technical skills. Though huge numbers of labour power is available in the production system, they are inclined towards the use of the traditional equipments in the production system. Such system takes comparatively huge span of time in the field of production.

  Less dependence on technology also put fuel in the system of animal husbandry in the peasant society. Domestication of animals are used as the tool for the production system. Basically in the simple peasant society, the machineries are replaced by the animal power.

  The division of labour is simple in nature. In a peasant society people tend to follow the natural lines of sex and age and also act as a promoter of mechanical solidarity.

- Small Scale Agriculture

  Most peasants are generally engaged in small scale agricultural activities basically with the help of their own family members. This scenario describes their production and consumption pattern in the society. Engaging in small scale agriculture, however do not necessarily make them subsistence farmers. They primarily produce food for their own consumption, but peasants also hire out their labour to other farms and engage in other forms of employment and they often practice buying and selling staple and other food items. This is how the circulation of the production goods takes place in a peasant society.

- Subordination

  In a developing country like India, where most of the population is engaged in the agricultural sector, it is difficult for each of them to enjoy a fruitful life as a peasant. Many peasants in India are landless peasants who work in other's farm and earn wages and little amount of their productive goods. Economically and socially the peasant class is dominated by more powerful group. This is the situation where the peasants face the maximum number of exploitation in the process of production. The exploitation can be found both in terms of money and physical labour.

- Dual Economic Nature

  In a peasant society, the production system takes place for both the purposes, for the family need and for the sale to earn monetary benefits. Thus a peasant household plays the role of both producer and consumer.

- Role of Natural Resources/Environment

  Role of natural resources or environment is one of the main factors that impact not only on the production system, but also the consumption pattern. For example, during cultivation, if the quality of soil is degrading or there is lack of proper water supply or there is transformation of the climatic condition, then it would be difficult for

the peasant to cultivate the regular or the seasonal crops in that land. Such situation will cause low production which ultimately leads to the poor consumption in the peasant society. Therefore, it is a matter of concern for the peasants to have aequate availability of natural resources along with a suitable environmental condition.

- System and Media of Exchange

  System and media of exchange in a peasant society describes their dependency on the primitive economic system. In a peasant society due to the inability to estimate the cost and benefits of different economic activity, the problem is aggravated by the absence of monetary value as the medium of exchange. The peasant society is in many ways nonmonetary because there is no generalized medium of exchange which exists. Various goods and services are directly or indirectly used as the value of exchange. This system is also known as the barter system. The market system plays an important role in a peasant society in the process of exchange of the commodities and services. For example, in the JONBIL MELA of North East India this kind of exchange takes place.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What is a peasant society?

Q2: What is the nature of economic system in a peasant society?



10.4 LET US SUM UP

- The peasant society or the peasant class refers to the pre-industrial society where people are engaged in agriculture as the prime source of livelihood.
- In India more than 60% of land is used for agricultural production system.

- The peasant society basically practices primitive economic system.
- Being a practitioner of primitive system, the peasants are dependent on the traditional age old techniques of production instead of modern sophisticated farming equipments like tractors etc.
- In a peasant society or a household family plays a significant role. The family members are basically engaged in the production system as the human labour power.
- Animal husbandry is also a common phenomenon. Animal are also used in the production process.
- The peasants are one of the vulnerable sections of our society. They experience oppression and exploitation in various fields by the powerful class.
- India has gone through many peasant movements and peasants were seen fighting for their own rights.
- Theodor Shanin is one of the famous scholars who had contributed to the society by his tremendous work on peasant class and peasant society. He has given many features of a peasant society.
- In the context of India, D DKosambi, Daniel Thorner etc. are the scholars who worked in the various fields of peasant class.
- In a peasant society household is the basic unit of production, consumption, property holding, socialization, moral support and mutual economic help.
- The peasant household operated as a highly cohesive unit of social organization with basic division of labour.
- At present times, migration has started taking place among the rural peasants to urban areas in search of better opportunities and jobs.
- The basic system of production is based on agriculture in both settled and shifting form, based on traditional use of equipments primarily with the involvement of family members.
- Family is the prime unit of production and consumption. The role of social units is also significant in this matter.



10. 5 FURTHER READING

- Dalton, George. et al. (1972).Peasantries in Anthropology and History. Current Anthropology, Vol. 13, No. 3/4.
- Edelman, Marc. (2013).What is a peasant? What are peasantries?A briefing paper on issues of definition. The City University of New York.
- Popkin, Samuel. (1980).The Rational Peasant: Political Economy of Peasant Society. Theory and Society,Vol. 9, No. 3, 411-471.
- Shanin, Theodor. (1973).The nature and logic of the peasant economy 1: A Generalisation. The Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol. 1, Issue. 1, 63-80.

10.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to No1 : A peasant society is basically comprehended as the rural society where the people rely on agriculture for their livelihood.

Ans to No2 : The economic system of the peasant society is based on primitive system of economy. In a peasant society monetary value has less importance. Different goods and services are considered as the media of exchange.



11.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) **Short Questions** (Answer within 150 worlds)

Q1. What is the role of technology in a peasant society?

Q2. Family is a prime unit of production and consumption. Briefly explain.

B) **Long Questions** (Answer within 300-500 words)

Q1. Discuss the features of the peasant society.

Q2. Describe the system of production, circulation and consumption pattern of a peasant society.

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