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24.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the backward classes in India. After studying this unit you will be able to

- explain the meaning of the term “backward classes” and the social categories which constitute it
- describe the social background of each of these categories
- identify some of the distinctive features and problems of each component of the backward classes in the context of social change.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 23 we had discussed the emergence and role of classes in India. Here we shall focus on the **backward classes**. The backward classes constitute an important segment of Indian society. They account for more than thirty per cent of the total population. Their condition is intimately connected with many of the basic features of Indian social structure.

The unit has been divided into three sections each dealing with one of the aspects spelt out in the objectives. In section 24.2 we have defined the composition of the backward classes. In section 24.3 we have given the social background of the backward classes and in section 24.4 we have described the distinguishing features and problems of the backward classes in the context of social change. Finally, in section 24.5 the unit has been summed up. Now let us examine the nature of backward classes.

24.2 NATURE OF BACKWARD CLASSES

The term 'class' signifies a form of social stratification. It is defined as a stratum of people who share a similar socio-economic status or position. It is relatively open as compared to other forms of stratification like caste. A class is considered to be backward if its members are economically and educationally less privileged compared to the other classes in that society. Let us see how a backward class in India is defined and what is its nature. Then we shall discuss the phenomenon of backward classes during the British period and finally, we will discuss how the Constitution has dealt with them.

24.2.1 Definition of Backward Classes

The backward classes in India can be understood only when we understand the basic character of Indian society which consists of a number of closed status groups. The 'backward classes' do not constitute one single whole but a multitude of social groups with varying positions and socio-economic standing in the social hierarchy of Indian society.

They suffer from disadvantages and disabilities which are age-old and which derive their sanction mainly from the caste system. Low status, poverty and illiteracy are social problems, which they have inherited due to their ascribed status of being born in a low caste or tribe.

24.2.2 Composition of Backward Classes

The backward classes constitute a large and mixed category of persons. They comprise roughly one-third of the total population of the country. They are made up of (i) the scheduled **tribes** (*adivasis*); (ii) the **scheduled castes** (the *Harijans*), and (iii) the **other backward classes**. The scheduled castes (SC) and the scheduled tribes (ST) are well-defined categories in the Indian Constitution. The other backward classes are not listed and defined. The problems of this category of people are, therefore, diverse and complex (Kuppuswamy 1984: 192).

24.2.3 British Rule and Backward Classes

The problems of the backward classes came to be more sharply focused during the British rule. The policy, the British government followed towards the backward classes, was partly humanitarian and partly political. The Government desired to do away with certain disabilities of the traditional social structure, which went against the Western principle of social justice and equality. They also extended economic benefits to low castes by encouraging certain occupations or trades such as liquor, hides and so on. The British policy, however, also emanated from another dimension. The Indian national

movement was gaining momentum. Its leadership was provided by the new intelligentsia which came from the upper castes. The British government did not look at them with favour. The perpetuation of cleavage between the high castes and the low castes was in their interest. This they ensured by extending economic and political benefits to the low castes. In this way the wedge was maintained between the high castes and the low castes during the British rule.

24.2.4 Backward Classes and the Indian Constitution

The Indian Constitution is silent on the definition of the backward classes. What one finds, however, is the characteristics of **backwardness** described and spread over the different articles of the Constitution. Article 15 (4) speaks of social and educational backwardness. In Article 16 (4), mention is made of backward classes and their inadequate representation in services. Article 23 speaks of forced labour. Article 46 refers to weaker section of the people in which the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are included.

Along with such references of backwardness, the Constitution also makes special provision for their upliftment. In addition, there is also legal provision. Article 17 of the Constitution, for example, abolishes untouchability. This gives the scheduled castes the same legal rights as any other caste. To reinforce this, the Untouchability (Offences) Act was passed in 1955, which fixed penalties for offences on this score. Similarly, the extension of adult franchise has given the scheduled castes the political power. The real problem, however, is not the removal of legal disabilities but social disabilities. To overcome this, the Constitution has laid down certain provisions under Article 46. It states that the state shall promote with special care the educational and economic advancement of the weaker sections of the people, in particular the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It shall also protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Finally, there is the Article 340 which makes provision for the state government to investigate the condition of the backward classes. Keeping these points in mind, we will now focus on the social background of the backward classes.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Distinguish between the usage of backward classes in general and its usage in India. Use about four lines.

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- ii) What is the composition of backward classes in India? Use about three lines.

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- iii) Tick the correct answer to the following question.

What was the nature of the policy of the British Government during the colonial period?

- a) Very humanitarian
 - b) Very political
 - c) Partly humanitarian and partly political
 - d) None of the above
- iv) Tick the correct answer to the following question.

In the Indian Constitution, what does the Article 17 speak about?

- a) Social and economic backwardness
- b) Weaker section of the people in which are included the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.
- c) Abolishing untouchability
- d) Making provision for the state to investigate the condition of the backward classes

24.3 SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF BACKWARD CLASSES

As mentioned to you earlier, the backward classes in India are socially, economically and educationally most backward section of Indian society. In this section, we will examine each category of backward classes, like the scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes and the other backward classes in detail. The details will include mainly their distinctive features with a special focus on their economic status. Let us first begin with the scheduled tribes.

24.3.1 The Scheduled Tribes

Before we describe the features of the scheduled tribes let us clarify the meaning of tribes. A tribe is defined as a group of people who can be identified as a homogeneous unit with certain common characteristics. The common characteristics that they share are a common territory, a common language and descent from a common ancestor. Apart from these features they are very often backward in technology, pre-literate and observe social and political customs based on kinship (Kuppuswamy 1984:194).

i) **Distribution**

According to the 1981 census, the scheduled tribes constituted nearly seven per cent of the total population. And as per the 1991 census they constitute 8.08 percent of the total population. They are believed to constitute the aboriginal element in the Indian society referred to as the '*Girijan*' or '*Janjatis*' or '*Adivasi*'. They are concentrated in certain geographical areas like the northern and north-eastern mountain valley and the eastern frontiers, hills and plateau between peninsular India and Indo-gangetic plains, hills and ghats in the south-western part of India. The Scheduled Tribe Lists Modification Order, 1956 listed 414 tribes in various states of India. They are scattered over almost

every state in India. They have, however, a fairly large concentration in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Gujarat. In Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), there are nearly seven million tribal people who belong to 68 different groups. In Bihar and Orissa, there are more than four million tribal people. Article 164 provides for a Ministry of Tribal Welfare in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa while the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides a considerable degree of social, cultural and political autonomy for the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The other tribal regions i.e. besides those which came under the 6th Schedule are referred to as the "Scheduled Areas" for the purpose of administration in the Constitution. The population of Scheduled Tribes in different Indian states as per 1981 and 1991 census is given in figure 24.1.

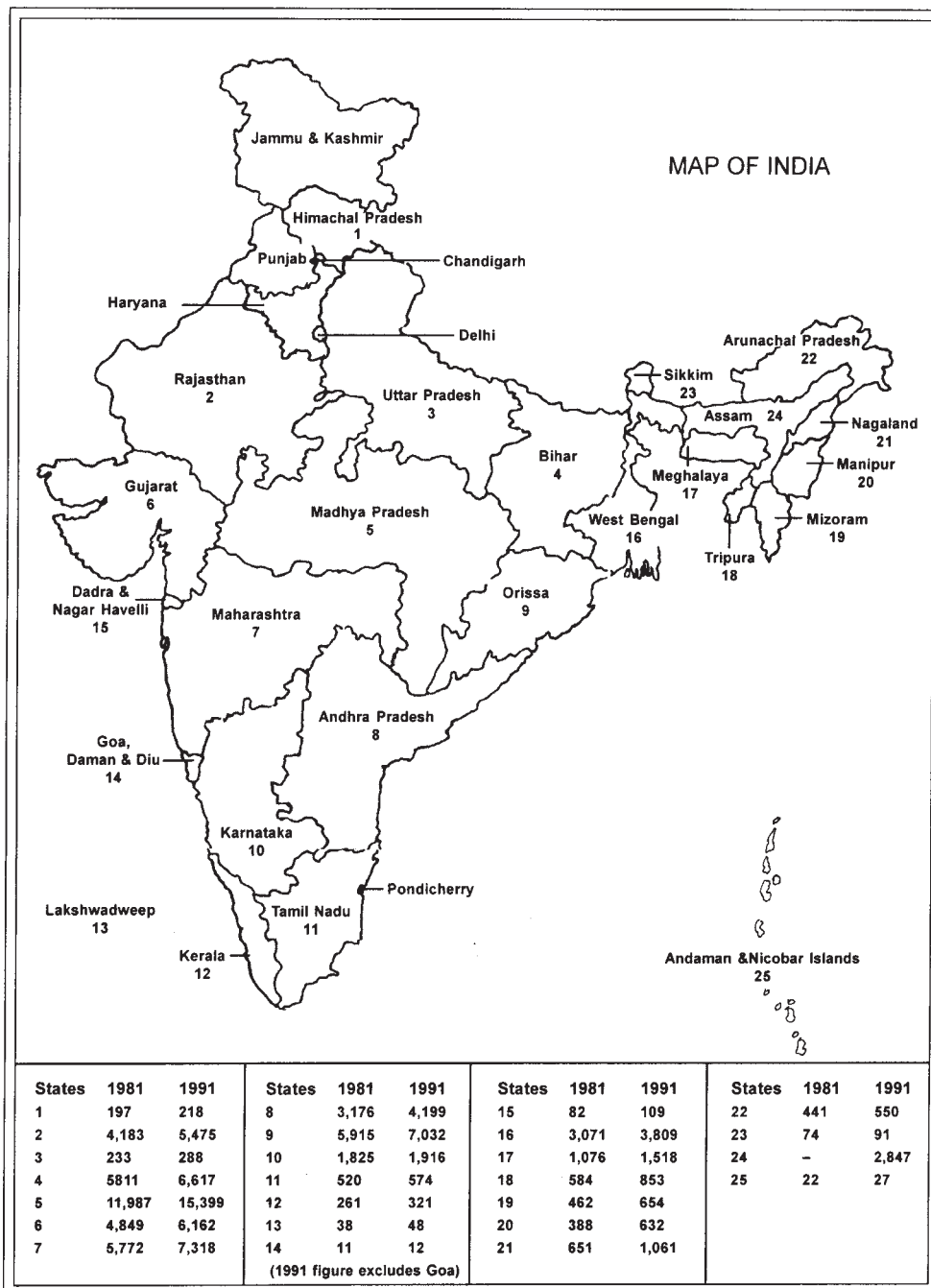


Fig. 24.1: Population of scheduled tribes 1981 and 1991 census

In spite of having a large population of tribal people in the states of M.P., Bihar, Orissa and some other states, these people only constitute a minority in the total population of these states. In contrast, north-eastern states present a different picture. The total tribal population in these states is small in comparison to those of the other states; but the tribals constitute a large percentage of the total population of these states. Besides these there are several other tribal regions like Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar, etc. where some very primitive tribes are found, which are increasingly becoming extinct.

ii) **Distinguishing features**

The tribal populations in India speak a large variety of dialects. There are numerous variations in their habits, customs and arts.

They live generally in the hill and forest areas. The ecological and social **isolation** has been historically one of the principal features of the tribal population. This isolation had left a definite mark on their social system. For example, until recently, they enjoyed a certain measure of political autonomy. Today, it is difficult to define the tribal people of India in terms of any single set of criteria. The difficulty arises from the fact that tribes in India are tribes in transition. Their political boundaries have collapsed. Their ecological and social isolation has been broken. A section of the tribal population has got absorbed into Hindu society, some have converted to Islam and some to Christianity. They have also been drawn into the various sectors of the economy, such as, plantations, mines, industries, etc. This makes the generalised description of the tribal population more difficult. Problem of description is not merely an academic problem, it is also a problem of vital practical concern. The benefit of many welfare programmes goes only to those groups which are listed under the category of scheduled tribes. The list of the scheduled tribes has, therefore, been drawn after careful consideration of each individual tribe so that no group is left out. Generally, such lists have been drawn keeping in mind the geographical isolation and the relative independence of their political and cultural system.

iii) **Economic status**

Economically, tribes vary all the way from food gatherers to the industrial labour force. There are many tribes such as the Kadar, the Malapantaram and the Paniyan of Kerala, the Paliyan of Tamil Nadu who are dependent on forest products. They are essentially food gatherers. They collect fruits, roots and other forest products and supplement them with hunting and fishing.

The bulk of the tribal population of India is dependent on agriculture with forest produce as secondary support. Some of these like the Mizo, the Garo, the Khasi, the Naga, practice shifting or '*jhum*' (i.e. slash and burn) cultivation. Others like the Oraon, the Munda, the Bhil, the Gond are engaged in permanent, settled cultivation. Many of the tribal groups have also migrated in large number to Assam and West Bengal and work as plantation labourers (see Jain 1988). Similarly, areas in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, which are rich in coal, iron and other minerals, have led to the emergence of industrial labour force which consists of the tribals.

Activity 1

Select at least two people living in your neighbourhood, who belong to the category of backward classes. Talk to them about the following:

- a) Have they faced any discrimination so far as an individual or as a social group, for example, a family group?
- b) If yes, then specify in which field(s) they have faced? social, political, economic, educational-school level or college level, and occupational.

Write a short note of about two pages and compare it, if possible, with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

24.3.2 The Scheduled Castes

We have already discussed in unit 22 of this Block, the term 'scheduled caste'. This term was coined by the Simon Commission (1927). The expressions 'Depressed Classes', 'Exterior Castes' and 'untouchables' were commonly used for the scheduled castes during the colonial period. Gandhiji called them '*Harijans*', (the people of God). But since the passage of the Government of India Act of 1935 they have been generally referred to as 'scheduled castes'.

i) Distribution

The scheduled castes constitute about 15.3 percent of India's total population according to the 1981 census and 15.93 percent as per the 1991 census. They, unlike the tribes, did not have a history of isolation. They have lived with the other castes and communities in segregation rather than isolation. Whereas the tribal people are concentrated in blocks in specific geographical regions, the scheduled castes are scattered through every state and practically through every district. They are concentrated in rural areas and are found commonly in multi-caste villages. Such distributional characteristics lead to certain difficulties. Development measures cannot be uniform, as the individual needs of each group belonging to the SC category are different. It is easier to implement special programmes of development for the scheduled tribes than for the scheduled castes. There is also more scope for the development of separatist political movements among the tribal groups than amongst the scheduled castes due to the very same reason of disparate needs and socio-economic statuses of each group.

ii) Distinguishing marks

The social condition of the scheduled castes has been governed in important ways by the Hindu concept of pollution. The idea of purity and pollution has generally been considered a factor in the genesis of the caste system. This idea was central to the practice of untouchability since ages. That is, social groups following occupations like scavenging, leather work, removing dead cattle and so on were looked upon as polluting groups; contact with them was considered to be defiling. So they were required to live in a separate colony outside the village. Many areas of social life were not accessible to them. They suffered various sorts of restrictions and disabilities. They were socially and legally prohibited from taking up any other profession than what was traditionally ascribed to them. They had no right to enter the temples. They

did not have the freedom to use public wells and tanks which the caste Hindu used. They were not allowed to wear the type of dress the upper caste Hindu wore. In several parts of India, women were not allowed to cover the upper portion of their body and wear ornaments. The practice of untouchability was at its worst in different parts of India. In Kerala, for example, to avoid upper castes being polluted, the distance at which the polluting castes had to remain was prescribed by tradition. Such practices were also maintained in north India. Although the practice of untouchability has been made an offence, the stigma of pollution has not by any means entirely removed. Their economic, social and ritual status continues to be depressed although there are certain indications of change.

iii) **Economic status**

Economically, they are among the poorest sections of the Hindu society. Traditionally as mentioned before, they were engaged in the most degrading occupations like scavenging, removing dead cattle, leather work and so on. Being predominantly rural, they are mainly engaged in agriculture today. Even in agriculture they are mainly found as landless agricultural labourers and marginal sharecroppers and peasants. As a result they are found in varying degrees of bondedness in different parts of the country.

24.3.3 The Other Backward Classes

We have observed that the Indian Constitution specially provides reservation for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Ever since the framing of the Constitution, the demand has been raised for a similar provision for castes, other than the scheduled castes and tribes, which are educationally and socially backward.

This category is, however, mentioned in the Constitution in only the most general terms. There is no all India list for the other backward classes. Lists have of course, been drawn by the Ministry of Education and by the State Governments.

There has been, however, much discrepancy in these lists. The Backward Classes Commission was hence set up in 1953 under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalekar, with a view to decide the criterion on the basis of which socially and educationally backward classes could be identified. The Commission pointed to a good deal of ambiguity in the lists prepared by the Central and State Governments. It also prepared a detailed list of the other backward classes. The list was prepared on the basis of the position of the castes in social hierarchy, percentage of literacy and its representation in services and industries. The Commission was of the view that the majority of the backward classes are ignorant, illiterate and poor. The recommendation of the Commission was not accepted as authoritative by the Government and hence its recommendation was not implemented. Since then the State Governments have been allowed to use their own criteria in drawing up the lists of the other backward classes. Some states like Karnataka did make some provision for the other backward classes. Special commission was appointed and special lists identifying the backward castes were prepared. Suitable laws were introduced by the Government to provide for reservation or special facilities. Some other southern

states too adopted similar measures. However, in states where such provisions were not made or where only half-hearted provisions were made, the demand for reservation of the backward castes began to be expressed in the shape of the movements. When this demand started acquiring the form of a national problem, the Central Government constituted the Mandal Commission to look into it. No sooner was the Mandal Commission report published than the question of reservation became an issue of heated debate and controversy.

Even though the commission submitted its report in 1980, the Union Government implemented its recommendation in 1990 only. The terms of reference of the Mandal Commission inter alia i) to determine the criteria for defining social and educational backwardness, ii) to recommend steps to be taken for the advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes of citizens of India, iii) to examine the desirability or otherwise of making provisions for the reservation of posts in favour of the backward classes. The national government under the leadership of V.P. Singh implemented one of the principal recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report reserving twenty-seven percent posts in central government services and public sector undertakings for the socially and educationally backward classes. The result was widespread agitation against the decision by the middle and upper castes (Nayak 1996). Similar commissions were also instituted by the state Governments of Gujarat (Baxi and Rane Commissions) and Madhya Pradesh (Mahajan Commission). The acceptance of their recommendations by the respective state Governments led to widespread violence by the upper castes in these two states. Thus, we can see that there was a lot of controversy over the definition of Other Backward Classes.

i) **Criterion**

The Central Government has since 1961 been pressing for the adoption of economic criteria in defining the Other Backward Classes. There has been some opposition to this from a number of state governments. Some of the castes included in the earlier lists of the other backward classes are fairly powerful in state politics. They have, therefore, exerted pressure on state governments to have the old criteria retained. The Lingayats of Karnataka and the Ezhavas of Kerala provide good instances.

The Central Government has not insisted on the old lists being abandoned. Yet economic and other pressures have been exerted on the state governments for the adoption of economic criterion. By now the majority of the states have adopted this criterion for defining backwardness for the award of scholarships to the other backward classes, other than the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

ii) **Economic status**

The core of the other backward classes consists of peasant castes of various descriptions. The position occupied by these castes is different from that of the scheduled castes. Frequently, they occupy a low position in the caste hierarchy, but are above the untouchables. They have no tradition of literacy. They have, therefore, lagged behind in the pursuit of modern education. They are often poorly represented in government jobs and **white-collar occupations**.

In spite of this, such castes sometimes occupy a dominant position in the economic and political system of the village. When they are also numerically preponderant, their control over the village, a group of villages or even a district may be decisive. It appears that **dominant castes** of this kind have developed a vested interest in remaining backward in the legal sense i.e. as a category, so that they can enjoy the number of benefits in education and employment provided by the Government (Srinivas 1962: 40).

Check your Progress 2

- i) What was the most distinguishing feature of tribal populations? Tick the correct answer.
 - a) Segregation
 - b) Absorption
 - c) Isolation
- ii) List the major features of the scheduled castes in traditional social structure. Use about two lines.

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- iii) Who constitutes the core of the ‘other backward classes? Use about three lines

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24.4 FEATURES AND PROBLEMS OF BACKWARD CLASSES IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

We have so far surveyed the social background of each of the component of the backward classes. We shall now focus on some of the distinctive features emanating from the changing social situation.

24.4.1 Context of Social Change

The traditional Indian society was highly segmented and hierarchical in character. The segments within it were separated from one another by clear-cut boundaries of marriage, restriction in interdining and other forms of social interaction. Social separation between different segments, each pursuing its own style of life could be kept intact so long as the society was fairly closed. In the traditional society, mobility-vertical or horizontal-was slow and limited. The expansion of transport and communication, spread of modern education, new economic opportunities, opportunities of political articulation ushered in during the British rule brought about significant changes in the traditional social structure. This led to the system being more open, allowing for greater mobility.

Of the many changes taking place among the backward classes, two in particular deserve special attention. They are (i) changes in their style of life, and (ii) changes in their relation to the political system. Of course, both are intimately related with changes in their economic life.

i) **Changes in style of life**

The changes in the style of life have followed two trends. They are **Sanskritisation** and **Westernisation**. Sanskritisation is defined as a process by which a caste or social group moves up the social hierarchy by adopting the style of life associated by tradition with the upper castes. These upper castes can be Brahmins, Kshatriyas or even Vaishyas. Westernisation in the Indian context, on the other hand, refers essentially to the process of social change introduced by the British rule in India. Individuals and groups began to respond and adopt to British ideals, relating to politics, economy, education, dress, manners, customs and so on. This follows from their taking up western education and getting into a modern occupation.

The process of Sanskritisation was at work even before the advent of the Europeans, however, it was slow and gradual. The reason being that the economy was relatively static and population movement very limited. Over and above, there were strong legal and ritual sanctions, which acted against the large-scale movement of people from one region to another. For example, each caste was identified with a certain occupation like *Dhobi*, *Nai*, *Kumbhar*, etc. and each family of these castes had a traditional patron whom it served, within the framework of *jajmani* system. Nobody in the traditional system could take over the occupation of another caste and as such, they could not give up their own caste occupation and go away to another place unless and until they were allowed to in special circumstances.

The pace of Sanskritisation was accelerated during the British rule due to factors mentioned earlier. Both the processes of Sanskritisation and Westernisation led to a change of life-style among the backward classes in India.

ii) **Changes in relation to the political system**

Alongside this process, there were changes in the political system. The political system, which developed during the British rule, gave increasing opportunities for political articulation to the people of India, especially those who acquired western education. This facility was taken advantage of by the backward classes. The advent of Independence and the introduction of adult franchise and more recently Panchayati Raj institutions have increased the access to power, especially political power, to the backward classes.

Such access led to a shift from Sanskritisation to competition for positions of higher bureaucratic and political power. These two aspects of change will now be examined with reference to each component of the backward classes, namely scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, and the other backward classes.

24.4.2 The Scheduled Tribes

i) Changes in the style of life

Changes in the style of life are, as mentioned before, two. First is Sanskritisation and second is Westernisation. Let us understand these now in relation to the scheduled tribes.

Sanskritisation

Culturally the distance was greatest between the tribal and the scheduled castes on the one hand and the better off upper caste sections of society on the other. The tribal people were ecologically isolated. They had developed their own traditions, customs, habits and ways of life. Despite this, social forces were at work leading to transmission of cultural elements from the more dominant and better-off sections of society to the more backward viz. the tribals. Two of the most important of such forces at work were Sanskritisation and Westernisation.

The tribal people have been isolated to a far greater extent from the broad stream of Sanskritisation than the scheduled castes and other backward classes. In spite of this, they have felt the impact of Sanskritic ideas and values. This impact has gathered momentum over the last several decades. This has no doubt been largely due to the opening of the tribal areas to the outside world. One of the most general effects of Sanskritisation of tribal communities is that it leads to the **integration** of segments of tribal society unto the wider caste structure and its **assimilation** in the wider Hindu fold. There have been numerous examples of this kind of integration or cultural assimilation. The Bhumij of eastern India, the Raj Gond in Central India and the Patelia in western India are some examples of such integration in the caste structure. This integration cannot be understood simply in terms of changes in rituals or style of life. Rather it is a reflection of fundamental transformation viz. tribal people getting integrated more fully into the wider economic system.

Westernisation

The Christian missions play an active part among tribal communities in India. They operate as agents of social change. Besides providing an alternative system of religious values, the missionaries introduce many new features into tribal society such as education and modern medical facilities. The spread of education and conversion to a new religion, i.e. Christianity have led to rapid Westernisation among the tribal communities. The process is more pronounced in the tribal belts of the north-eastern region than elsewhere. The Mizo, Naga, Khasi are some examples representing such a process. Conversion to Christianity has also taken place in the region of Chotanagpur (Bihar).

The opening of tribal areas to traders, money-lenders and others on the one hand, and cultural contact on the other, have led to disintegration of tribal social organisation. Economically, they have been facing great hardship due to land alienation, and indebtedness, which resulted from opening up of tribal areas to the outside world. Their cultural and social life too has been greatly affected by this process. The question of their integration into the mainstream has become an important subject of discussion. Broadly there were three schools of thought in this regard (i) One of these schools of thought supported the

case of isolation. J.H. Hutton and V. Elwin favoured such a position with a view to protecting tribal people from the evil effects of uncontrolled social and cultural contact. Their policy of isolating the tribal regions was also called “National Park Policy”. (ii) A second school of thought, which found favour with G.S. Ghurye and some social reformers, advocated the assimilation of tribal people in the larger social structure. (iii) Later both Ghurye and Elwin discarded their earlier stand in favour of the policy of integration. The policy of integration aims at bringing the tribal people into the mainstream, but without the loss of their distinctive social organisation and culture.

ii) Changes in Relation to the political system

The impact of change on the political system of the scheduled tribes has been of great importance. Let us see what these changes are.

The approach to the tribal problem differs in many ways from the approach adopted towards the scheduled castes. In the case of tribals, there are certain special problems also. These arise partly from their geographical isolation and partly from their ethnic identity. The consciousness of their distinct ethnic identity has led to organised political activity. The demand for a tribal homeland and the growth of political parties indicate politicisation of tribal society. Through these political processes tribal communities, like the Naga, Khasi, Garo, Mizo attained their separate tribal state. Such processes are still at work in some parts of the tribal belt. The demand existed in the past for a separate Jharkhand state in parts of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh illustrates this trend. It ultimately resulted in the formation of Jharkhand State in the year 2000.

Activity 2

Read an article about the backward classes which has appeared in any magazine or newspaper within the last six months. Note down

- a) the issue about which the article is written
- b) the role of the backward classes
- c) your view regarding the issue discussed.

Write a note about two pages. Compare, if possible, your note with those of the other students at your Study Centre.

In this section we examined the distinctive features and problems of the scheduled tribes in the context of social change. We saw the changes that have taken place in their cultural life in terms of the process of Sanskritisation and Westernisation. Next we examined the changes in their political system and their role in it. Now let us examine these changes and their impact in the case of the scheduled castes.

24.4.3 The Scheduled Castes

i) Changes in the style of life

The scheduled castes have experienced some changes in their style of life. We will discuss some of these changes here.

Sanskritisation and challenge

Like the tribal population the scheduled castes too had a distinct culture of their own. As mentioned earlier, they were not just one group but several groups, which were all hierarchically placed with relation to each other. They were excluded from temples, bathing ghats, wells and other public places. In south India, and some parts of north India, they were not allowed to use sandals, umbrellas, silken cloth and so on. Their women could not wear upper garments. A large number of civic rights were denied to them by caste and ritual sanctions. Despite this, social forces were at work and there was certain measure of Sanskritisation even in the traditional period, although quite limited.

The new courts established by the British introduced the principle of equality before law. By doing so, it removed one set of obstacles to change in the social life of the scheduled castes. But this did not automatically enable them to exercise their civic rights. Various kinds of sanctions were still applied to keep them in their inferior position.

Since they were economically dependent on the upper castes, they could not press their legal claim to equality. Even the dominant castes among the backward classes rarely looked with favour upon the scheduled caste's claim to equality of status. Physical violence or threat of it has been frequently made on them for attempting to exercise their civic rights. This happens particularly in villages.

In fact, as early as 1930, the assertion by the Adi-Dravida untouchables against traditional disabilities had aroused the wrath of Kallar caste in Tamil Nadu. The disregard of traditional disabilities has led to the use of violence by the Kallars against the untouchable castes whose huts were burnt, granaries and property destroyed and livestock looted. Such incidents do take place even today in villages of Bihar, U.P. and a few other states. Sanskritisation has thus never been easy for the scheduled castes. This is so because the effective adoption of the Sanskritic style of life is dependent on a number of preconditions. These include a minimum of economic and political power and not too inferior ritual status. The scheduled castes on the other hand, have a very low economic, political and ritual status. This has made Sanskritisation difficult for them.

Education and mobility

At the same time the channels of mobility on the economic front is still very restricted. This is largely due to the level of literacy and education, which is still very low. Owing to their very inferior economic position, education turns out to be an important channel of **social mobility**. There is strong demand for education among the scheduled castes population. The government too is making considerable investment in the form of scholarships to meet such demands. Indeed, some groups amongst the SCs have already been making effective use of facilities provided by the government to better their socio-economic and educational position. Formerly, many of the posts in the higher services reserved for members of these communities could not be filled for want of suitable qualified candidates. This is no longer the case now and is not likely to be so in future. With such efforts, especially by the government to promote the mobility of SCs one can expect a change in their style of life. However, much of the benefits and privileges provided by the government for

the SCs has been cornered by a small section of them who are referred to by Sachchidanand as the “*Harijan Elites*”. Majority of the SC population in the remote corners of India is still suffering from poverty and exploitation (see unit 22 for more details).

There is also a measure of ambivalence in the attitude of the scheduled castes. On the one hand, there is an urge to adopt many of the symbols of the upper caste groups and on the other there is also an undercurrent of resentment against the traditional order. Such an attitude is most easily perceptible among the younger generation of the scheduled castes who have been exposed to the ideas of secularism and democracy. In some places, it has been nourished by strong social movement of fairly organised nature.

In Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect movement of the Adi-Dravidas challenged the traditional social and ritual order. In Maharashtra, a considerable section of the scheduled castes became converts to Buddhism. The neo-Buddhist movement spearheaded by Ambedkar, a prominent leader of the scheduled castes, was in fact an assertion of self-respect on the part of the scheduled castes. Buddhism was not the only religion, which attracted this alienated section of the Hindu society. Islam, Sikhism and Christianity too attracted converts from the lower sections of the society. The scheduled castes have been converted in large numbers to Christianity, particularly in south India. However, in spite of the conversions these people have not benefited much in terms of social status.

ii) **Changes in relation to the political system**

The impact of change in relation to the political system has been very significant amongst the scheduled castes. Let us see what these changes are.

The channels of mobility in the status system or in the sphere of economy are very restricted. On the other hand, the new political system has thrown open many possibilities of advancement to people from the scheduled castes. Today, if a scheduled caste person cannot find place in higher status group economically or socially, he or she can still hope to become an influential political leader. And where the scheduled castes and *adivasis* are concerned, the principle of reservation provides a sure method of political representation.

There is a clear trend towards increasing participation in the political process by a section of society, which has hitherto been excluded from position of power. They have had the experience of several elections. Their awareness of political parties, movements, propaganda, etc. has grown. Younger sections of the groups are busy building political connections.

The institution of Panchayati Raj has quickened the pace of politicisation. Provision has in general been made for some reservation of seats for the scheduled castes at all levels of local self-government. The participation has led to conflict and cleavage especially with the groups of the other backward classes. Where the scheduled castes are more or less matched in numerical strength with caste Hindus, a certain amount of tension and even violence has become a part of the system. Their participation in the political system has been more marked at the national and state levels than at the village or district level. So far we talked about the features and problems of the scheduled castes in the context of social change. Let us see how and in what ways the other

backward classes have undergone changes in their socio-cultural and political life.

24.4.4 The Other Backward Classes

i) Changes in style of life

The changes in the style of life of the other backward classes have been described in this section.

Sanskritisation

The other backward classes occupied a low position in the traditional society but were above the line of untouchability. Many of the castes included in this category also enjoyed a measure of economic and political dominance. A good example of this is provided by the Okkaligas of Mysore studied by Srinivas. These castes (classes) or a section of them were, therefore, the first to seize the new opportunities offered during the British rule in comparison to the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes. They drew maximum benefits from new economic opportunities. And they were also the ones most interested in Sanskritising their style of life in order to get social acceptance of their material success.

Social movements

Yet they experienced considerable gaps between themselves and the upper castes who were rapidly westernising themselves. The upper castes such as the Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas not only adopted the western life-style but took up western education with all seriousness. And because of their tradition of education they did not find it very difficult to do so. The result was that western education was mostly confined to them. In view of this, only the members of these castes could get the jobs, in the government services and could further increase their prestige. This increased the cultural, social and economic distance between them and the other backward classes even more. Thus, the social inequality was perpetuated in the new system to a large extent. The lower castes realised that mere Sanskritisation was not enough to improve their social condition. It did not provide them the avenue to obtain well paid and prestigious jobs in the administrative services. So they desired to get themselves educated through the English medium in order to qualify for these jobs. In fact, the demand for educational concessions was the major objective of the Backward Class Movement, which started in the early part of the twentieth century. The movement was strongest in Madras, Mysore and Maharashtra where Brahmans had almost total monopoly in higher education, professions and government employment (Kuppuswamy 1984: 187).

A characteristic feature of this movement was that it was caste based. The caste organisations had made education of their children an important part of their programme. However, it was soon realised that the qualified youth could not get admission in the professional and post-graduate courses as admission was based on marks in high school and college examinations. Naturally they were handicapped, since the boys from such homes where the tradition of education existed were able to secure higher marks as compared to them.

The other dimension was that lecturers and examiners, as well as, those who held government jobs were from upper caste groups. This increased the fear

among the other backward classes that they were being discriminated against. Hence, they formed associations and federations to advance and protect the interest of the non-Brahman especially in south India. Reservation of seats in professional courses, post-graduate studies, and in government services, became their major demands. The opposition to Brahman dominance thus did not come from the low and oppressed castes but from the leaders of powerful rural dominant castes such as the Kamma and Reddi of Andhra Pradesh, Vellala of Tamil Nadu, Nayar of Kerala, Okkaliga of Mysore, Yadava or Ahir and Kurmi of U.P. and Bihar and so on.

ii) **Changes in relation to the political system**

Today, there is considerable debate regarding the reservation policy to uplift the backward classes. This has become more pronounced after the publication of the Mandal Commission Report. The controversy is not on whether or not to have reservation but on the criterion of reservation in the context of social change. To put it differently, the question centres around the criterion of backwardness in the wider perspective of social change.

There are those who view that reservation should be in terms of economic class instead of castes. They say that the caste based reservation is against the basic spirit of the Constitution. The Constitution promises equality and non-casteist and non-communal society. They also argue that the caste system is disintegrating. The relationship between caste and traditional occupation is breaking down. The definition of backwardness is altered with change in its form and basis. Under the changed situation, no group can be called forward or backward.

Further, if caste-based reservation is carried on, then the benefits are likely to be grabbed by those within the concerned castes who are economically and educationally better off. Hence, to them, the basis of backwardness should not be caste but economic category. That is deprivation in terms of income, education and occupation should form the basis of backwardness and, therefore, also the criteria of reservation policy.

Those who are opposed to this view, however, argue that caste basis was/is aimed at countering and removing social injustice and not mere economic backwardness. They argue that the problem of backwardness has arisen out of a long history of exploitation and oppression. The backward castes have hence not been able to enter into the normal process of development and social change. They face not only material obstacles of lack of education and resources but also come across innumerable hurdles in the form of social norms and restrictions. Hence they argue for caste basis of reservation.

The controversy has thus centred around the determination of (a) the unit, and (b) criterion for delineating the backwardness. The national and the regional upper caste elites are in favour of individual as the unit. Accordingly, they prefer deprivation in income or education as the sole criterion of backwardness. As against this, the backward caste elites, both national and regional, emphasise caste as the unit as well as the sole criterion in determining the backwardness.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Distinguish between Sanskritisation and Westernisation. Use about five lines.

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- ii) List some of the approaches to tribal policy. Use about three lines.

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- iii) Identify three factors standing in the way of rapid Sanskritisation among the scheduled castes. Use about four lines.

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- iv) List the bases of backward class movement. Use about three lines.

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24.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have seen that the term “backward classes” has different connotations in India and the backward classes consist broadly of three major components, viz. the scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes and the other backward classes.

Social background of each of these three components has been discussed in this unit in terms of their geographical distribution, distinguishing features and economic status. Major emphasis in the unit is on the distinctive features and problems emanating from the changing social situation. This has been studied in terms of changes in their life style and in relation to the larger political system.

24.6 KEYWORDS

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|--------------------------------|---|
| Assimilation | Process of fusion into larger social system |
| Backwardness | Lack of educational and economic advancement |
| Backward classes | Communities or groups falling into the larger category of scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and the other backward classes |
| Dominant caste | A relatively high caste enjoying numerical preponderance, economic and political power. |
| Integration | Process of getting closer to larger social system but without loss of distinct socio-cultural identity |
| Isolation | Lack of contact with outside world |
| Other backward classes | Castes occupying low position but above the untouchables, known also as the backward castes |
| Sanskritisation | Process by which a caste or group moves up the social hierarchy by adopting the life style of the upper castes |
| Scheduled caste | Ritually low castes, constituting the lowest strata of Hindu society who used to be considered to be polluting by the upper castes |
| Social mobility | Process by which an individual or group moves from one position to another in the social hierarchy |
| Tribes | A culturally homogeneous community, which shares a common territory, language and traces its descent from a common ancestor. It is generally low in technology, is preliterate and observes social and political customs based on kinship |
| Westernisation | Process by which a community adopts the life-style of Europeans, especially the Britishers |
| White-collar occupation | Pertaining to, or designating, the class of workers, as clerks, etc. who are not engaged in manual labour |

24.7 FURTHER READING

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24.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Backwardness in general is understood in terms of lack of economic and educational advancement. In this sense, it is taken as an attribute of an individual. In India backwardness is taken as an attribute not of an individual but of a certain group in which membership is determined by birth.
- ii) The composition of backward classes in India includes the scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes, and the other backward classes.
- iii) c)
- iv) c)

Check Your Progress 2

- i) c) Isolation
- ii) a) degrading occupation,
b) settlement outside the village
d) social, political and cultural disabilities.
- iii) Peasant castes with low position in caste hierarchy but above the scheduled castes constitute the core of the "other backward classes".

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Sanskritisation is a process by which a low caste adopts the life-style of upper castes and attempts to move up in the local social hierarchy; while Westernisation is a process of social change mainly brought about by the impact of British rule in India. In this process individuals or social groups adopt the values, customs, life-style of the Europeans, especially Britishers.
- ii) Some of the approaches to tribal policy are
a) isolation,

- b) assimilation and
 - c) integration.
- iii) The factors, which are standing against the rapid Sanskritisation of the scheduled castes, are
- a) low ritual status
 - b) low economic status and
 - c) low level of political participation.
- iv) Backward Classes Movement was based mainly on the realisation of the gap between lower castes and upper castes in terms of a) higher education and b) appointments in government services.

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