
UNIT 4 DEMOCRATISATION AND CHANGING NATURE OF INDIAN SOCIETY

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

A close look at the developments in India after independence brings us to the realisation that establishment of democracy – economic development coupled with the idea of distributive justice has transformed a traditional society. The state has been the central instrument of change. Politics has performed the role of an agent in facilitating this transformation. When India set out on its journey as an independent nation, in spite of our claim of being a democratic republic the political participation was constrained by social and economic inequalities. Nevertheless, periodic elections at national, state and local levels have encouraged vigorous participation of traditionally suppressed and deprived sections of society. It can be said that democracy has proved to be a weapon against the privileges and powers of the few. Social and economic changes have gone a long way in relaxing the grip of rigid hierarchical structures, social discrimination and cultural attitudes. In spite of these positive developments India still has to contend with mass poverty, illiteracy, communal violence and atrocities against women. This unit deals with the democratisation of Indian society and nature changes which have taken place in it.

4.2 SOCIAL REFORMS AND INEQUALITIES DURING COLONIAL PERIOD

The social reform movements of the nineteenth century attacked caste system, which was graded into hierarchy of status. At the bottom of this caste system were placed the untouchables who constituted nearly twenty five per cent of the Hindu population and suffered the worst form of discrimination. They were not allowed to enter temples or to use tanks, wells and irrigation canals used by the higher castes. They could not go to schools in which children of upper castes studied. Entry to the public services like police or army was banned for them. The only option before them was of entering the

menial jobs considered to be unclean like scavenging, removing dead bodies, etc. In some parts of the country even their presence was considered polluting. Among the social movements mention must be made of some of them such as the one led by Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra and Sri Narayan Guru in Kerala. These movements questioned the caste system and caste-based inequality. Gandhi made abolition of untouchability an integral part of the freedom movement. He made efforts to make the upper castes realise the enormity of injustice done through the practice of untouchability. He opposed British attempt to treat untouchables as separate from the Hindus. B.R. Ambedkar who belonged to Mahar caste, an untouchable caste, in Maharashtra emerged as a powerful leader of the untouchables in the late 1920s. He fought against caste system and was in favour of separate electorate for the untouchables. His argument was that socially segregated should be politically segregated. When in 1932 the Communal Award provided for separate electorate Gandhi went on fast against it. Ambedkar agreed to sign the Poona Pact according to which untouchables were given reserved seats within the general Hindu category.

For centuries women in India have been subjected to oppressions of different kind. This has been legitimised by various religions practiced in the country as well. They were not supposed to have a personality of their own; they were seen as an adjunct of their husband's personality. The traditional views had a great appreciation for the role of a wife or a mother but consigned women as individuals to a low position. Prevalence of practices like polygamy, purdah, child marriage and custom of Sati undermined their position. Hindu women had no right to inherit property while Muslim women could inherit only half as much as a man could. The social reform movement all over the country had a common theme and it was improvement in the condition of women.

4.3 THE IDEA OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WAKE OF INDEPENDENCE

Several members of the Constituent Assembly were of the view that the values and institutions of liberal democracy would transform India's tradition-bound social structure. Austin is of the view that the members of the Constituent Assembly opted for the Westminster model of liberal democracy. A liberal model of democracy based on the ideas of individual choice, consent, liberty and equality was seen as a liberating alternative to the old traditional organisation of life based on customs, ascriptive status, hierarchy and inequality. According to Austin it was also because of our familiarity with the working of these institutions under the colonial period. The Preamble of the Constitution promises to secure to all its citizens justice social, economic and political. In the Preamble priority was given to the concept of justice as compared to the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity and to social and economic as compared to political justice. The order of the words indicates that social and economic justices were considered to be the fundamental norm of the constitution of India. The democratic society visualised by the makers of Indian constitution lays due emphasis on building a just society.

Liberal Democracy was found only in those countries whose economy was predominantly capitalist. What took place in these societies was democratisation of liberalism and liberalisation of democracy. The emphasis on economic justice as stated in the Preamble and through various provision of the Directive Principles of State Policy attempted to

allay the bias of liberal democracy towards economic inequality. Members of the Constituent Assembly were optimistic about the potential of the democratic institutions provided by the constitution to transform Indian society. Sarvepali Radhakrishnan held that modern parliamentary democracy would bring about a fundamental change in the structures of Indian society. K.M. Pannikar in his book, *Hindu Society at Cross Road* published in 1955 expressed his views that Parliamentary Democracy based on universal adult franchise presented the masses with the dynamite for the destruction of social institutions based on privileges and inequalities. The introduction of civil liberties gave even the mute people a voice. The introduction of Universal Adult Franchise extended the right to exercise franchise even to the poor and uneducated. W.H. Morris-Jones rejected the need of a strong government for eradication of poverty and reduction of inequalities. He held that the most substantial erosion of poverty took place in Western Europe only after liberal democracy had been extended far enough to create strong pressures from the ranks of the disadvantaged. He firmly believed that democracy could be used by the disadvantaged as a weapon against the established privileges and power of the few.

At the time of independence the Indian state was being run by an elite political class which was primarily made of upper caste males. They also had preeminence of urban English educated Brahmins who shared secular outlook. The government under the Congress Party was a continuation of the British rule because like the British it did not attempt to change the social order but to adapt to it. Attempt by the parliament and the Congress Party to provide for economic social and educational upliftment of the underprivileged sections have largely been symbolic. The Congress Party adopted a conciliatory approach to the privileged and did not show much interest in organising poorer section of society for political action.

The Rise of backward classes (this is a broad category which includes middle peasants as well as poor peasant cases) in Bihar and U.P. emerged as important political force from the 1960s in opposition to the Congress Party which was dominated by the upper castes. The land reforms in these states were only partially successful. However, they had undermined the powers of the upper caste landlords and benefited the backward castes. The intermediate backward caste middle and rich peasants Yadavs, Jats, Kurmiers, Gujars etc. also benefited from the Green Revolution, community development programmes, panchayati raj and the cooperatives. This newly acquired economic power made them restless to translate it into political supremacy. This was expressed through formation of many farmers' parties in the 1960s. This development in the post-independence period is seen as the first democratic upsurge. This period witnessed an expansion in the democratic base of the Indian democracy. As political competition became serious an alternative to one party dominance of the Congress Party seemed to be emerging. In the beginning this group identified itself with socialists and various political outfits launched by Chaudhary Charan Singh from time to time. In these states struggles were raised for replacing the dominance of the upper castes by winning seats in legislatures and staking claims for reservation in government jobs. Similar pattern was witnessed in several other states of the country with the rise of backward classes — Marathas in Maharashtra, Patels in Gujarat, Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka and Reddies and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh.

4.4 PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS AS REFLECTION OF DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The 1970s represents a watershed development. Indira Gandhi was attempting to strengthen the popular base of the state by a series of measures like bank nationalisation, abolition of privy purses and nationalisation of insurance. Policies targeting specific groups like SCs, STs, rural poor and workers were also made with the same objective. Indira Gandhi appealed directly to the vast masses of the rural and urban poor whose conditions had not improved even after three decades of independence. The appeal to this group and the slogan of *Garibi Hatao* translated in to electoral victory for the Congress Party led by Indira Gandhi in 1971 General Election and the Assembly Election of 1972. By the beginning of 1973 Indira Gandhi started to decline. People's expectations had remained unfulfilled. The policies of the government had failed to make dent in rural or urban poverty. The Congress Party was increasingly seen not as a party, which was interested in radical social change but as a party endorsing and reinforcing inequality. The country was faced with myriad problems like price rise, industrial stagnation, continuous failure of monsoons and large-scale unemployment. Agitations and protests were the order of the day. Poor peasant movements were going on in different parts of the country against the oppression of the landlords. Firstly Gujarat and then Bihar became theatres of popular movements yearning for change. Jay Prakash Narayan popularly known as JP came out of political oblivion to lead the Bihar Movement and gave a call for Total Revolution. Very soon he took the movement outside Bihar. This movement received support from students, middle classes and a section of the intelligentsia. It also got support from almost all the non-left parties who had failed to defeat the Congress Party in the 1971 Election. Ghanshyam Shah refuses to accept this movement as revolution because it did not have any revolutionary ideology, cadre and organisational network to implement its agenda.

The Janata government's attempt to implement twenty five per cent reservation for the Backward Castes met with stiff resistance from the upper castes. This issue polarised the backwards and forwards throughout the state. The backward castes Movement grew stronger in the state by forging alliance with poor peasants among Rajputs, Scheduled Castes and Muslims. This group supported the Janata Dal, which ousted Congress (I) at the national level in 1989 and in the state assembly emerged as the single largest party in 1990. The defeat of the Congress (I) by the Janata Dal led by V.P. Singh at the center in 1989 and several states in 1990 marked the disintegration of long established pattern of mobilisation in the northern India and also marshalling out of cooperation among the disadvantaged groups. It had become possible because of an alignment between Rajputs and relatively more prosperous backward castes like Yadavs, Jats and Kurmis and other backward castes. They were also supported by Muslims, traditionally a vote bank for the Congress Party.

The 1990s have witnessed a participatory upsurge among the disadvantaged section of society. Before the 1970s the urban participation used to be higher than the rural participation. But now rural participation has overtaken urban participation. There has been tremendous rise in the participation of women in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. This period has also registered a definite upswing in the electoral participation of the tribals. The dalit participation is higher in UP than in Bihar, MP and Rajasthan.

Yogendra Yadav is of the opinion that perhaps India is only country where the participation of the disadvantaged section has overtaken that of the privileged section. Yadav is of the view that this upsurge in electoral participation does not pose a threat to the democratic system in India because there is no sign of widespread erosion in the legitimacy of the system or mounting frustration among the participants. This is not in agreement with S.P. Huntington's theory, which looks at excessive participation in absence of early institutionalisation as a recipe for revolution, of rising frustration and eventual collapse of democracy.

4.5 BACKWARD CLASSES' AND DALITS' CHALLENGE TO THE DOMINANCE OF UPPER CASTES

The introduction of the universal adult franchise, periodic elections and of democratic consciousness led to forward caste dominance being challenged by first the middle castes and then by the dalits. Capturing power by the OBCs and dalits appears to be a panacea for the inequalities of status and income in-built in to the caste system. Laloo Yadav came to power by giving the slogan smash the upper castes [*Bhura bal saf karo*]. The prime concern of the leaders from these groups is gaining government positions. Similarly, the BSP used slogans like *mat hamara raj tumhara nahin chalega* or *vote se lenge PM/CM arakshan se SP/DM*. They do not have faith in reforms. They aim at achieving social change not through social reforms but by share in political and administrative power. The Dalits and the other backward castes are by no means natural allies except for the fact that both these groups have been the victims of upper caste dominance and they stand to gain from the decline of this dominance. Between them they share a relationship of animosity, doubt and suspicion. There are instances of atrocities on dalits in many parts of the country by people belonging to other backward castes over question of wages, use of water from tanks or wells or other trivial matters.

4.6 STATE, DEMOCRACY AND CHANGE

In the north more particularly in the states of UP and Bihar state machinery, police, block development officer, village level workers and leadership of local Panchayati Raj Institutions were biased in favour of the rural rich. According to Ghanshyam Shah there existed a fraternisation between rural rich and bureaucracy. This was because most of the bureaucracy came from the same section of the society. The leadership of the political parties was also in the hands of the same section of society. They sent most of the MPs and MLAs to national parliament and state assemblies. The panchayat leadership also used to be in the hands of people from the same section of society. All this led to funds for rural development being cornered by the well off sections of society because upper caste dominated political system bureaucracy and panchayati raj institution did not show necessary concern and commitment to the needs of the poor. The whole picture seems to have changed now.

4.6.1 Caste

The rise of the other backward castes movement and dalit movement has challenged the upper caste dominance. The complexion of national parliament and state assemblies has changed with more and more MPs and MLAs from these sections. The demand to

implement reservation policy was not just for some jobs to unemployed youth from these sections of society but also for the crucial role they play in delivery of public funds. When Mayawati became Chief Minister she replaced upper caste officials holding key posts like chief secretary, CM's private secretary with scheduled caste officers. The same thing happened in Bihar with Laloo Yadav's rise in power where the upper caste officers were replaced by those belonging to the OBCs. The reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for SCs, STs and women provided by 73rd amendment can work as a bulwark against these organisations being manipulated for the benefit of the rural rich only.

Among the important programmes launched by Mayawati during her Chief Ministership was Ambedkar village development scheme providing development funds to 15000 Ambedkar villages with thirty per cent dalit population. But the dalit and backward class assertion is concentrating more on status and dignity and less on economic inequalities. Erecting statues of the non-Brahmin leaders like Jyotiba Phule, Periar/EV Ramaswamy Naicker, Ambedkar and Sahu Maharaj and installation of Ambedkar statues in every village and town were meant for fighting upper caste hegemony and boosting the status of the dalits. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government in Bihar renamed many universities after non-upper caste leaders in the similar way. But these leaders have failed to address themselves to the problems of structural inequality. Land reform is not on their agenda. They have also failed to address themselves to the economic and extra-economic exploitation of the weaker section. The track record of the RJD government is even worse in this regard. It has been treating the Naxalite Movement as purely a law and order problem. This is also true about the approach of the TDP government towards PWG movement in Andhra Pradesh. They fail to realise that most of the issues raised by them can be seen as demand for better wages, dignity and land reforms. The state seems to be shying away from its commitment to economic justice.

In Tamil Nadu the politics of accommodation followed by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagams has not caused much disturbance although the level of reservation has risen to 68 per cent including fifteen per cent for scheduled castes. The government provided opportunities for people from the lower castes in government jobs. The upper castes excluded from government jobs had no reason to sulk because they were encouraged to run privately founded engineering and medical colleges. These institutions were sustained by capitation fees charged from the students and were affiliated with state universities. This strategy together with social welfare measures for weaker section of society stabilised the support for the government without threatening the interest of landed upper castes or business classes. Kerala has benefited from public policies directed to whole population. This state has witnessed general improvement in life expectancy, literacy, and above all dignity of dalits. It is mainly due to general welfare policies of the state. On the whole in south India reservation for backward castes and expenditure on social welfare programmes sustained the politics of accommodation because it offered small number of disadvantaged castes to join the urban middle class by providing them opportunities to join politics and getting into government jobs.

4.6.2 Gender

Dramatic changes have taken place in the status of women since independence. The constitution promised complete equality to women. Women like men also got right to

vote. B.R. Ambedkar, the law minister after independence submitted a bill that raised the age of consent and marriage, upheld monogamy, gave women right to divorce, maintenance and inheritance and treated dowry as stridhan or woman's property. This bill faced stiff opposition from the conservative section of society. The bill had to be postponed because of this. Finally important sections of the bill got passed in four separate acts: The Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act. The extension of legal rights to Hindu women was not sufficient but it was definitely a bold step. This can be gauged from the stiff opposition faced by the government while extending the same legal rights to women from other religious communities. In 1985 the Supreme Court granted a pittance to Sahsp Bano, a divorced Muslim Woman; the conservatives among Muslim community created so much of furor in the name of interference in the Muslim personal law that Rajeev Gandhi's government wilted and introduced a bill in the parliament to negate the Supreme Court judgment. Some legal rights have been exercised even as some have remained on paper. The right to vote has been taken seriously by women even in rural areas. Many times they take free decisions independent of their husbands about whom to vote. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have provided for reservation of 33 per cent seats in local self-government institution both urban and local for women. It has played an important role in correcting gender bias in our political and social life. But the promises to reserve seats in parliament have not been met yet. Kerala has achieved 86 per cent adult literacy rate among women. After Kerala Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have achieved remarkable success in female literacy. The population of rural females aged 12-14 who have never been to any school is one half in India as a whole, above two third in U.P., M.P. and Bihar, and as high as 82 per cent in Rajsthan.

4.7 LIBERALISATION, POVERTY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Although the major Indian political parties contrived to mobilise the poor on the basis of community and not class, this does not mean that economic differentiation has ceased to be criteria to understand Indian politics. Except in Kerala and West Bengal the unorganised majority of the poor peasantry, agricultural labour, artisans and workers in informal sectors have become dependent on social welfare programmes sponsored by the central government. Even the redistributive programmes introduced in the early 1970s at the height of the *Garibi Hatao* campaign could not make any significant impact because of lack of commitment. In the 1990s the state in India has embarked upon the path of liberalisation. It was partly a response to depleting foreign exchange reserve and partly under pressure from world financial institution namely World Bank and IMF. The Indian state capitulated under pressure from western financial institutions into policy formation and running of state. Liberalisation is primarily beneficial to upper and middle classes. An estimated forty million Indians are living the life styles comparable to their counterparts in advanced industrial economies. Another sixty millions are on the threshold of comfortable middle class living. This middle class is going to proliferate because of the proliferation of the service sectors and white-collar jobs. There is a fear that it may further aggravate the condition of rural and urban poor. The Indian state has been ineffective in creating human base for development. The lack of basic education, gender rights, health facilities and employment opportunities for a big chunk of the population does not go well with the goal of economic justice. Marginalised groups who

are not organised are not in a position to pressurise the state to fulfill its welfare commitments.

The imperatives of economic liberalisation are identified with an aggravation of conflict between economic and political interest of the disadvantaged. Liberalisation is creating avenues for business and white-collar jobs to I.I.T and I.I.M. professionals. This suits the interests of the upper and middle class because they have the wherewithal like capital to benefit from new business opportunities opening up as part of liberalisation package. The youth from this section are more likely to walk away with jobs in Multi National Corporations with astronomical salaries because of their access to quality education. With privatisation and disinvestments becoming order of the day the number of jobs in public sector are going to be less and less. The benefit of reservation is available only in government jobs. That is why many dalit leaders look at liberalisation as a conspiracy to deny them the benefit of reservation. Economic development so far has failed to create enough jobs to absorb the landless and rural and urban educated. These people have to suffer deprivations of various kinds. Agricultural labourers, marginal and small peasants with small or no patch of land are the most deprived section of society. They suffer more than others from poverty and lack of education, health and housing facilities.

4.8 HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX AND REALITY

Social and economic development in India is marred with wide prevalence of poverty, inequality, social injustice and poor quality of life. Despite remarkable achievements on the front of economic growth and political democracy India has entered the twenty first century with low per capita income, intolerably low level of literacy and a very low position on the world index of human resource development. In the early sixties the Planning Commission formulated the concept of poverty line. Below this line were people whose consumption especially of food grains, did not come up to a minimum level in terms of calories. In 1971 nearly fifty nine per cent of the population was living below poverty line. Since then poverty has been registering a steady decline. In 1994 it stood at thirty six per cent. Nearly three million people equal to the population of India at the time of independence are still below poverty line. Another fact about poverty is that it varies from area to area. In Bihar nearly sixty three percent people are below poverty line despite the anti-poverty programmes launched by the government because of the corruption. The main brunt of poverty is borne by poor peasants, agricultural labourer and the urban poor. The problem of poverty is further compounded by the existence of glaring social and economic inequality. While the poor have not become poorer actually (they have benefited from economic growth) the gap between poor and rich has widened and is likely to widen further in the age of liberalisation. The fruits of development have been and are being disproportionately cornered by the upper and the middle class.

In the latest index of human development compiled by the United Nations Development Programme in 1999 India was ranked 132 out 147 countries covered. Life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate and literacy among other things has been taken into account while compiling this index. A comparison of the record of colonial period with post-independence period makes us realise that India's achievements have been creditable. But a comparison with even our neighboring countries reveals that we are lagging far

behind them in regard to these important areas. An Indian's life expectancy at the time of birth was 32 years in 1950. It went up to 63 years in 1998 which seems to be quite impressive but it was 69.8 years and 73.1 years in 1997 in China and Sri Lanka respectively. Infant mortality rate per 1000 live births which was 227 in 1941 had fallen to 71 in 1997. However, it was much lower for China (38) and for Sri Lanka (17) in 1997. Another sad fact about India is that too many women still die at the time of child birth. The current maternity mortality rate per hundred thousand live births in India is as high as 507 compared to 95 in China and 140 in Sri Lanka. But the biggest problem faced by India is persistence of high illiteracy. In 1952 nearly 82 per cent of Indians were illiterate. Even in 1997 it was as high 38 per cent. The comparative figure for China and Sri Lanka were as low as 17.1 and 9.3 per cent respectively. Moreover, the gender gap in case of literacy was astonishingly high in India nearly twice as many women being illiterate as men.

A tangible outcome of the democratic process launched in India after independence clearly seems to be that it has succeeded in giving a voice to the marginalised. Around the middle of 1990s there has been an upsurge in political organisations and electoral participation of the disadvantaged groups. The Congress Party, which shied away from giving proper representation to the disadvantaged, is facing routs in many parts of the country. New parties have tried to correct the imbalance in representation. The most conspicuous outcome of the long process of social churning has been increase in representation of lower castes in government more particularly at regional and local level. The balance of power has shifted from the hands of upper castes to the backward and lower castes. Another significant development is the rise of BJP to national power supported by the middle and upper classes. This social block has the potential of denying the gains from the democratic upsurge of the lower castes. The BJP's commitment to India as a Hindu nation has led to redefinition of Indian nationalism by giving a distorted meaning to secularism. It is backward looking and upper caste dominated, and seems very appealing to the elite and educated Indians whose interest is threatened by popular movements and lower caste assertions.

4.9 SUMMARY

To sum up, it can be said that democratisation more particularly universal adult franchise, more or less free and fair elections, mobilisation of the disadvantaged section of society has played a very important role in replacing an order dominated by the upper castes. This has changed the complexion of our parliament and government with more and more representatives from the disadvantaged sections. The dalits, minorities and the women have started raising questions about who is responsible for their grinding poverty. They have benefited from their movements and organisations and have learnt to extract gains from political parties in exchange of their support.

4.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss how the social reforms and inequalities were related during the colonial period.
- 2) Write a note on the relationship between the peoples' movements and social change.
- 3) Explain the changes in Indian society with reference to the caste.
- 4) Write a note on the impact of liberalisation on the changes in Indian society.