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## UNIT 8 BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENTS

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### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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Past three decades have seen the emergence of the backward classes in different fields of life. This has been more spectacular in electoral politics. Though backward classes became a significant social and political force in some parts of the country, especially south India even earlier, they got national attention following the introduction of the Mandal Commission Report by the V P Singh-led government at the centre in 1990. This unit deals with different aspects related to the collective actions of the backward classes in India.

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### 8.2 WHO ARE THE BACKWARD CLASSES?

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Marc Galanter in his book *Competing Equalities: Law and The Backward Classes in India* observes that backward classes is a very loose concept. Sociologically, these classes consist of a large number of the backward castes which remain above the Scheduled Castes and below the upper castes. These castes consist of intermediate castes — the cultivating castes, artisans and service castes. In the traditional social and economic structures, while the intermediary castes were involved in the production process in the land, the service castes and artisans provided services to the society. The backward classes known as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), are other than those backward classes, which include the dalits/Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The principal intermediary OBCs are Yadavs, Kurmies, Koeris, Gujjars and Jats in north Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and some of them in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh; Kappus, Kammas, Reddies, Vokkaliggas, Lingayats, Mudliars in south Indian states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu; Patles, Kolis, Kshatriyas and Marathas in west Indian states like Gujarat and Maharashtra. They belong to the upper or dominant backward classes. The service castes and artisans, principal castes among them being carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers, water carriers, etc., are found in almost all states in varying numbers. They are also known as the Most Backward Castes (MBCs) in some states. Their relations were regulated by *Jajamani* System. In this system the service castes and artisans were known as clients of the dominant or superior castes. The latter included both the high castes and the intermediary

cultivating castes. In this unit the backward classes and Other Backward Classes will be used interchangeably.

The OBCs, in fact, include heterogeneous caste groups with differences in their social and economic conditions and political participation. Even the OBCs which share common characteristics in terms of their place in the social hierarchy differ from each other depending on their agrarian history. Not all intermediary castes which are now identified as OBCs belonged to the inferior group so far as their position in the agrarian structure was concerned. For example, Jats in most part of UP, Punjab which also consisted of the area of present day Haryana and Bharatpur region of Rajasthan were a dominant community even in the pre-Independence period. They had their own traditional caste councils or *khaps* headed by the hereditary chief or *chaudhary* to manage their juridical and social affairs. They were independent peasant-proprietors involved in the cultivation of land; they did not have the landlord above them and they paid rent to the state through their own representatives. While they were independent of any landlord between them and the state, they were placed in the dominant position over other village communities. But most of other intermediary castes were not independent peasant-proprietors. They were the tenants of landlords, who in several instances were the absentee. They were exploited by the latter in several ways. These intermediary castes were subjected to the exploitation of the landlords like the service and artisan castes. Thus, despite belonging to different castes, the intermediate castes, artisans and service castes shared certain cultural and economic characteristics. That is why the OBCs are those castes which are educationally and socially backward, not necessarily economically and politically.

To get categorised or recognised as an OBC, is political issue. A community should possess enough political clout to get itself identified as an OBC. There are several instances of demand by the castes to get themselves identified as OBCs. In 1999 the Rajasthan government and in 2000 the Uttar Pradesh government added the Jats to the lists of OBCs.

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### **8.3 SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE BACKWARD CLASSES: IMPACT OF THE STATE POLICIES**

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The backward classes emerged as a powerful social, economic and political block during the post-independence period in the countryside as a result of the policies of the state. But there have remained internal differentiation among them. While the intermediary castes came to control the affairs of the village society, the artisans and the service castes joined the ranks of the marginalised groups of the wage labourers, marginal and poor farmers. Even though the upper backward or the intermediary castes also are undergoing differentiation in terms of the economic and educational entitlements, in political terms these differences get blurred. It will be imperative to discuss the impact of the state policies on the rise of the backward classes in the country. The principal policies which impacted them included: the land reforms which consisted of the abolition of landlordism, putting ceilings on the size of the landholdings, consolidation of landholdings, and Green Revolution in the selected areas of the country; welfare schemes for the welfare of the lower backward classes. Besides, the state policies the changes which occurred from within the society — population growth, breaking down of the

jajmani system also affected them. Although the state policies in different states of the country did not have the uniform and desired impact on the backward classes in the country, they definitely gave rise to the backward classes. They became the owners of their land, which they had been cultivation before the land reforms as the tenants, captured the local level political institutions like village panchayats in several parts of the country. On account of their numerical strength along with the control on the village land they came to control the village vote banks. All the upper backward classes are relevant examples of this change — Jats, Yadavs, Kurmies, Gujjars, Kappus, Kammas, Reddies, Lingayats, Vokkaligas, Patels, Kolis, Marathas, etc., in different regions of the country.

It must be emphasised that among the state policies it was the Green Revolution which had the most remarkable impact on the rural economic, social and political life. Most of the groups affected by this belonged to the upper backward classes. It not only disturbed the traditional patterns of relations it also gave rise to the emergence of capitalism in agriculture. It was marked by the mechanisation, displacement of human labour in agriculture and development of market economy and commercialisation of agriculture. Even the capitalism had the differential impact on the backward classes. While the upper backward produced mainly for the market and remained largely the self-cultivators, those belonging to the lower backwards joined the ranks of the wage labourers in the agriculture or the non-agrarian sectors or even migrated to the cities.

The fact that the OBCs belong to distinct economic categories and to the middle castes and the artisans and the service castes have given rise to the issues which are both economic and caste-related. As you study in sub-sections 8.4.2 and 8.4.3, these have been the focus of the mobilisation of backward classes through out the post-Independence period both at the national and state levels. However, the nature of these issues have changed over a period of time. For example, the social issues were combined with those of abolitions of landlordism and demand for providing ownership right to them in land before the implementation of the first phase of land reforms. These were replaced by the issues which emerged mainly after the Green Revolution — remunerative price of the crops, subsidised inputs, better infrastructure along with the issue of reservation in the political institutions and public jobs for the backward classes.

Another factor which is related to the changes in the socio-economic conditions of the backward classes is rise of a middle class among the OBCs. Despite the failure of the education policies a group of educated persons, who became their spokespersons, had emerged among the backward classes. However, this group was not as big as it was among the high castes. In north India Charan Singh, S. D. Singh Chaurasia and Chaudhry Brahm Prakash were some of the spokes persons of the backward classes belonging to the early decades following Independence.

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## **8.4 BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENT IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

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### **8.4.1 North-South Comparison**

In comparison to North India, the backward classes in south India were mobilised much earlier. They not only got reservation in the government jobs but they were also mobilised

into the social movement and entered politics in south India much before than the backward classes of North India. Christophe Jaffrelot in his book *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* attributes the early rise of backward classes in South India and their late rise in North India to the processes of ethnicisation and *sanskritisation* respectively. Through ethnicisation the backward classes of south India questioned the Brahminical domination and sought to replace it with that of the backward classes or *dravidians*. It was a revolt against *sanskritisation* in south. They not only got reservation in the public institutions and they replaced the brahminical domination in politics also. As compared to the north Indian states, where reservations for the OBCs were introduced from the 1970s at different points of time, the south India states had completed the process of granting reservation for the OBCs by the 1960s. This process in south India, in fact, had started as far back as in 1921 when the Maharaja of Mysore decided to implement reservation for the OBCs in the government jobs in order to end the Brahmin monopoly there. In the post-independence period different states in south India appointed backward classes commissions under pressure from the backward classes organisations and political parties, which espoused for the causes of the backward classes. In contrast, the north Indian backward classes were undergoing the process *sanskritisation*. Unlike their counterparts in south India they attempted to follow the customs, habits and rituals of the high castes. Several backward castes traced their lineages to the high castes — Brahmins or Kshatriyas.

Scholars explain this difference between north and south in the following way. The Brahmins had monopolised the high castes domination over the low castes in South India and their number in comparison to Brahmins of north India was much smaller. In contrast, the Brahmins were not the only high castes in north India. Their domination over the low castes was shared, thus diluted, by several high castes - Rajputs, Kayasthas or even Vaishyas. In north India the organisation like Arya Samaj spread the message among the backward classes that it was the *karma* not the birth which determined the place of a person in society. While it encouraged the backward classes to *sanskritise* themselves by tracing their lineages to the high castes, wearing *janeo* (sacred threads), etc., it also attempted to bring back to Hinduism those Muslims who were supposed to have converted from Hindu religion through the *Suddhi* movement. This instead of challenging the hegemony of the high castes or Brahminism revived it and strengthened it. As a result it dampened the chances of strong backward class movement in north India. The backward classes virtually were the non-Brahmin classes in south India. Unlike their counterparts in north India, they did not attempt to follow the high casts, i.e. Brahmins, they in fact questioned their domination in culture, administration and politics. The most effective expression of the dravidian revolt against the Brahmin domination in south was provided by the Self-Respect Movement led by E. V. Ramaswami Naicker, alias Periyar, during the 1920s and 1940s. The Self-Respect Movement was based on the premise that the original inhabitants of India were non-Brahmins or the dravidians, not the Brahmins. The main principle of this movement was *Samadharma* or equality. In order to get their self-respect and the non-Brahmins should replace the dominance of Brahmins in education, culture, politics and administration. The Self-Respect Movement included: boycott of Brahmins in rituals like weddings; condemnation of *varnashrama dharma*; burning of *Manu Smriti*. The non-Brahmins added suffix "Dravida" and "Adi" to their associations. M. C. Raja (1883-1947) was another advocate of the dravidian ideology. He became president of the Adi Dravida Mahasabha in 1916 and chaired the All India Depressed Classes Association since 1928.

Not only in south India even in west India the backward classes were mobilised much earlier in comparison to north. Jyotiba Phule belonging to backward Mali caste who became a source of inspiration for the latter day social reformers including E.V. Naicker, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the non-Brahmin Maratha rulers of Kolhapur Sahuji Maharaj, set up *Satya Shodhak Samaj* in 1873 in the Bombay Presidency in order to mobilise the low castes including dalits and non-Brahmins or backward classes. *Satya Shodhak Samaj* was able to unite untouchables and backward caste peasants. Christophe Jeffrelot considers Phule to be the first social reformer who did not fall into the “traps of sanskritisation”. He was also the first reformer who worked for the alliance of the *Bahujan Samaj*, the low castes, backward peasant classes and untouchables. He gave Aryan theory which suggested that the high castes Aryan were not the original inhabitants of India; they had come from outside. The original inhabitants were the untouchable, artisans, services castes and the peasant backward classes. The high cases had subjugated the low castes and established their dominance over them. His Aryan theory inspired several low castes leaders of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the latter period; Mangoo Ram held that the dalits in Punjab were Ad Dharmis; Achhootanand in UP held that dalits in UP were Adi-Hindus; and south Indian reformers believed that the Brahmins were outsider Aryans in their areas, and they as dravidains were the original inhabitants of their area.

The Maratha princes like Maharaja of Baroda and descendent of Shivaji, Maharaja of Kolhapur, Shahu, inspired by the philosophy of Phule challenged Brahmins’ domination of their administration. Shahu introduced policies to empower the non-Brahmins in administration and to end Brahmin’s domination in it. He set up boarding houses for the students belonging to the low castes; made primary education free and compulsory in 1917; and most importantly he introduced 50 per cent reservation of seats in government jobs for the “members of backward communities” in the state administration. He also encouraged Marathas to replace the Brahmins in administration and replaced the Brahmin priests with them. Again, the British administration reserved seven seats for the Marathas and allied castes in the Legislative Council of the Bombay Presidency in 1919. Organisations like All India Maratha Mali Union, Yadav Gavli Association emerged in the Bombay Presidency. These organisations strove to forge an alliance of different non-Brahmin castes.

#### **8.4.2 The Electoral Mobilisation**

The backward class politics in India has largely been related to electoral mobilisation and creation of support base among them by the political parties and leaders. Other issues like the reservation for the OBCs or their mobilisation on the class issues like those related to the farmers also get linked to the electoral politics. The increasing participation of the OBCs, their entry into the state legislatures and parliament is indicative of the empowerment of the backward classes. During the post-Independence period there have been attempts on the parts of individual leaders and political organisations to mobilise the backward classes into the participatory politics. While the backward classes in south India emerged before the independence and they benefited from this legacy in the post-Independence period, in the north India their systemic mobilisation took place in the post-interdependence period. The main leaders and political parties which mobilised the backward classes in north India include Charan Singh, Karpoori Thakur, Socialist parties and the different political formations at different point of times like Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.



Charan Singh carved out a political base for himself among the middle caste peasantry in UP and Bihar through a well designed strategy. He could do this while he was still a member of the Congress Party. Though Jats, the caste he belonged to did not fall in the official category of the OBCs till 2000 in UP and 1999 in Rajasthan, he identified himself with the backward classes of UP and Bihar. These castes were mainly Yadavs, Kurmies, Koeries, Kachhis, Lodhs, etc. His strategy was two fold — he combined the caste issue with the class issue. Through out the 1950s and 1960s, he addressed a large number of meetings of the backward classes belonging to Yadavs, Kurmies, Koeries and Lodhs in UP; attended the backward class meeting in Badhoi in 1953. He also praised the role of Congress in abolition of landlordism, in which he had played prominent and decisive role. These activities of Charan Singh projected him as a backward class leader. This created division within the Congress; a section of the high caste Congress leadership accused him of identifying with the backward classes. They argued that Charan Singh's activities had alienated Congress from the high castes, and suggested that attempts should be made to win back support of these castes to the Congress. Charan Singh defended himself by arguing that he was not favouring the backward classes. Rather the Congress had neglected them. When Charan came out of Congress in 1967 and formed the *Samyukta Vidhayak Dal's* (SVD's) coalition government, he gave 29.63 per cent representation to the backward classes in ministry. Merger of his Bharatiya Kranti Dal headed by him with the Samyukt Socialist Party (SSP) which resulted in the formation of the Bharatiya Lok Dal in 1974 made him a close ally of the socialists. This won him ally allies among the backward classes in both state — UP and Bihar. Through the allies like Karpoori Thakur in Bihar and Devi Lal in Haryana, Charan Singh emerged as a leader of the backward classes and peasantry in north India. Meanwhile, after becoming the self-cultivators as a result of the land reforms, Green Revolution and having availed of educational and other policies a generation of leaders belonging to the intermediary castes emerged on the political scene by the 1970s in north India. After the death of Charan Singh in 1987 and Karpoori Thakur in 1989, they have come to occupy a an important place in politics of north India, especially UP and Bihar. Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lallu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kunar provide some of such example. As far back as 1930s in Bihar, three major backward classes — Yadavs, Kurmies and Koeries formed *Treveni Sangh* to replace the dominance of high castes — Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs in the electoral politics. This alliance, however, could not sustain after the elections of 1937.

Sanjay Kumar observes in his article “New Phase in Backward Caste Politics in Bihar, 1990-2000” (1999) that it was 1995 assembly election in Bihar which showed a new trend towards the empowerment of the OBCs in the state. It was marked by the polarisation of the backward support base; Yadavs supported the Janata Dal while the Kurmies and Koeries supported Samata Party. The fact remains that despite the division in their support to different parties including the BJP, the OBCs have become a force to reckon with in politics of Bihar. The division of support of backward classes to different parties is indicative to the competitive politics among the backward classes, to their empowerment. In case of Gujarat Ghanshyam Shah argues that the OBCs' support to BJP there does not mean their support to the ideology of “Brahminical dominance”. It is “part of an electoral game” in which the needs of the upper backward classes are satisfied.

It can be said that after the backward classes have emerged as a social block by the 1970s in north India their mobilisation has largely been in terms of electoral politics, i. e. allotment of tickets by political parties to the OBCs, their entry into the legislative assemblies and parliament and formation of governments by the political parties headed by the backward class leaders or those who identified with them. The political parties with different denominations led by Charan Singh, Janata Dals of different factions and Samajwadi Pary led by Mulayam Singh Yadav can be identified as backward class parties. The emergence of the BSP in the 1980s as a political force opened an opportunity for an alliance of the Bahujan Samaj, the backward classes and the dalits. This brought the together the Bahujan Samaj Party and BSP — the representatives of the OBCs and dalits, together to form the government in UP in 1993-1994. But because of the contradictions among the OBCs and dalit social basis of these parties and personality differences among the leaders, they could not continue the alliance. Even a large number of the BJP leaders belong to the OBCs.

It must be noted that the backward class mobilisation by different parties has largely been confined to the upper backward or the intermediate castes, who form the dominant sections of the village society. The artisans and the service castes, generally known as the Most Backward Classes (MBCs) remain largely excluded from empowerment. However, some attempts are also made to empower them. For example, in 1975 the Congress government appointed the Most Backward Class Commission in UP generally known as Sathi Commission named after its chairman, Chhedi Lal Sathi. Even Rajnath Singh, the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh appointed Social Justice Forum under the chairmanship of Hukum Singh in 2001 in order to suggest measures to empower the MBCs of UP. But these measures were unsuccessful for one or the other reasons.

At the same time when Charan Singh was attempting to carve out his base among the backward classes in UP, the socialists were also involved in this pursuit in north India. In an attempt to end the monopoly of the high castes Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia sought to mobilise the backward classes as soon as he broke away from the Congress. He advocated 60 per cent reservation for the backward classes, dalits and minorities in the government jobs. Merger of the Indian National Backward Classes Federation, a splinter group of the All India Backward Classes Federation in 1957 with the Socialist Party brought the socialists and the backward classes together. Through out the 1960s socialists and backward class leadership continued to raise the issues of the backward classes. The most important of these was the demand to implement the Kaka Kalelkar report. Leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and B. P. Mandal were active during this period. But by the 1970s the AIBCF became defunct. However, the emergent backward class leadership continued to raise their issues even after that.

### **8.4.3 Politics of Reservation**

The introduction of Mandal Commission Report by the V P Singh's government in 1990 recommending reservation 27 per cent reservation for the OBCs in the central government jobs made the reservation a national issue in Indian politics. It not only drew reactions in its support or against it, it also changed the contours of Indian politics. The appointment of Mandal Commission by the Janata Party government in 1990 was result of the pressure of the backward classes leadership and their clout. As mentioned

earlier by the 1970s the backward classes, especially those belonging to the intermediate castes had already made their presence felt in the politics of India and states.

The demand for reservation for the backward classes was raised in the Constituent Assembly by Punjab Rao Deshmukh, like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had raised the similar demand for the Scheduled Castes. In order to articulate the reservation issue for the backward classes he founded All India Backward Classes Federation (AIBCF) on 26 January 1950. Within the AIBCF the differences grew between those having allegiance to the Congress on the one hand and those having allegiance to the Socialist Lohiaites. This resulted in the split in the AIBCF, with the splinter group naming itself as National Backward Classes Federation (NBCF). The former was headed by Punjab Rao Deshmukh, a Congress leader and the latter was headed by R L Chandpuri. After the death of Chandpuri, Chaudhry Brahm Praksah became its leader. Besides, a large number of informal and unregistered organisations existed in different states and different levels in country.

The Mandal Commission was result of the consistent demand by the backward class leadership to get the Kaka Kalelkar Commission's, the first backward class commission report accepted. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission was also the result of the demand for such commission by the backward class leadership at the time of Independence. But Kaka Kalelkar's recommendations of class as the criterion for identification of the backward classes and rejection of the Commission's report by the parliament led to the demand of appointment of another commission which would take social and educational backwardness as the criteria for identification of the backward classes.

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report, however, has not settled the issue of reservation. Newer groups continue to demand to be recognised themselves as the OBCs. Whether a community can get itself identified as OBCs is a political question; it depends on the political factors.

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## 8.5 SUMMARY

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The backward classes are also known as the Other Backward Classes or the OBCs. They consist of the heterogeneous groups — the intermediate peasant castes, artisans and the service castes. While the intermediate castes among the OBCs or the upper backward have emerged as among the most assertive social group in the country, the other sections of the OBCs also known as the Most Backward Classes (MBCs) remain excluded from the preview of development and empowerment. The backward class movement started late in north India as compared to south India.

The mobilisation of the OBCs has been around two issues — their electoral participation and the reservation. In north India they have been mobilised by Charan Singh, Socialists including Ram Manohar Lohia, Karpoori Tahkur and different political parties. They linked the social issues of the OBCs with the economic issues of the peasantry. The appointment of Kaka Kalelkar and Mandal Commissions and the implementation of the latter's report were result of the backward class mobilisation. The mobilisation of the backward classes on their recognition as OBCs, appointment of backward class commissions, politics related to them — the support and opposition to them, continue to remain relevant in the politics of social movement in India.



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## 8.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Who are the backward classes? Discuss the impact of the state policies on their emergence.
- 2) Compare the conditions of the backward classes in north India with those in south India.
- 3) Discuss the patterns of mobilisation of backward classes in electoral politics.
- 4) Write a note on the reservation politics.