

## 1. Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 03 (Class XII, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Caste, other backward classes and untouchability – Part 2
Module Id	lesy_10502
Pre-requisites	Sociology, Concepts, Social Institutions, Stratification
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Caste as a discriminating system</li><li>• Race &amp; Cast – cross cultural comparison</li><li>• Untouchability &amp; its dimensions</li><li>• State &amp; non- state initiative</li><li>• Other backward classes</li></ul>
Keywords	Indian society, social stratification, social inequality, caste, other backward classes, untouchability, social exclusion

## 2. Development Team

Role	Name	Affiliation
National MOOC Coordinator (NMC)	Prof. Amarendra P. Behera	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Program Coordinator	Dr. Mohd. Mamur Ali	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Course Coordinator (CC) / PI	Dr. Sheetal Sharma	Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Subject Matter Expert (SME)	Dr. Sheetal Sharma	Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Review Team	Ms. Seema Banerjee	Laxman Public School, Sarav Priya Vihar, New Delhi

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In this module we are discussing social inequality and exclusion. Social inequality is division of society into social strata which are placed one above the another. **Social inequality** occurs when resources in a particular society are distributed unevenly among groups and communities or even among individuals. This uneven allocation is done on the basis of rules or norms of allocation, that define specific patterns along lines of socially **defined** categories of persons.

Social disparity happens when assets in a given society are conveyed unevenly, normally through standards of distribution, typically along lines of socially strata of society. Income disparity, in terms of money that people earn through various mechanisms, salary, rent, profit in business, commission etc creates social imbalance. Despite the fact that the controls of financial matters and human science by and large utilize diverse hypothetical ways to deal with look at and clarify monetary disparity, both fields are effectively required in inquiring about this imbalance. Be that as it may, social and regular assets other than absolutely monetary assets are likewise unevenly dispersed in many social orders and may add to societal position. Social imbalance is connected to racial disparity, sexual orientation disparity, and ethnic imbalance and also different status attributes.

The Constitution of India promises to people of India, justice, equality, freedom of expression, equal access to opportunities so that we can effectively reduce social inequality and social-imbances. The Constitution of India requires the state to treat every citizen uniformly and similarly, without according formal privilege to or respect to birth, caste, language or religious affiliation. However inequality, discrimination, in society continues to exist. In this chapter we are discussing various aspects of social inequality, social disparity and their effect on social, cultural, political and economic aspects.

## **CASTE AND TRIBE – SYSTEMS JUSTIFYING AND PERPETUATING INEQUALITY**

### **THE CASTE SYSTEM AS A DISCRIMINATORY SYSTEM**

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The caste system is a distinct Indian social institution that legitimises and enforces practices of discrimination against people born into particular castes. These practices of discrimination are humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative.

Historically, the caste system classified people by their occupation and status. Every caste was associated with an occupation, which meant that persons born into a particular caste were also 'born into' the occupation associated with their caste – they had no choice. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, each caste also had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status, so that, roughly speaking, not only were occupational categories ranked by social status, but there could be a further ranking within each broad occupational category. In strict scriptural terms, social and economic status were supposed to be sharply separated. For example, the ritually highest caste – the Brahmins – were not supposed to amass wealth, and were subordinated to the secular power of kings and rulers belonging to the Kshatriya castes. On the other hand, despite having the highest secular status and power, the king was subordinated to the Brahmin in the ritual-religious sphere. (Compare this to the '*apartheid*' system (Racial discrimination) described in Box 5.1)

However, in actual historical practice economic and social status tended to coincide. There was thus a fairly close correlation between social (i.e. caste) status and economic status – the 'high' castes were almost invariably of high economic status, while the 'low' castes were almost always of low economic status. In modern times, and particularly since the nineteenth century, the link between caste and occupation has become much less rigid. Ritual-religious prohibitions on occupational change are not easily imposed today, and it is easier than before to change one's occupation. Moreover, compared to a hundred or fifty years ago, the correlation between caste and economic status is also weaker – rich and poor people are to be found in every caste. But – and this is the key point – the caste-class correlation is still remarkably stable at the macro level. As the system has become less rigid, the distinctions between castes of broadly similar social and economic status have weakened. Yet, between different socio-economic groupings, the distinctions continue to be maintained.

Although things have certainly changed, they have not changed much at the macro level – it is still true that the privileged (and high economic status) sections of society tend to be overwhelmingly 'upper' caste while the disadvantaged (and low economic status) sections are dominated by the so called 'lower' castes. Moreover, the

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proportion of population that lives in poverty or affluence differs greatly across caste groups. (See Tables 1 and 2) In short, even though there have been major changes brought about by social movements over more than a century, and despite changed modes of production as well as concerted attempts by the state to suppress its public role in independent India, caste continues to affect the life chances of Indians in the twenty-first century.

### **BOX 5.1**

#### Race and Caste – A Cross-Cultural Comparison

Just like caste in India, race in South Africa stratifies society into a hierarchy. About one South African in seven is of European ancestry, yet South Africa's White minority holds the dominant share of power and wealth. Dutch traders settled in South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century; early in the nineteenth century, their descendants were pushed inland by British colonisation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British gained control of what became the Union and then the Republic of South Africa.

To ensure their political control, the White European minority developed the policy of apartheid, or separation of the races. An informal practice for many years, apartheid became law in 1948 and was used to deny the Black majority South African citizenship, ownership of land, and a formal voice in government. Every individual was classified by race and mixed marriages were prohibited. As a racial caste, Blacks held low-paying jobs; on average, they earned only one-fourth what whites did. In the latter half of the twentieth century, millions of Blacks were forcibly relocated to 'Bantustans' or 'homelands' – dirt-poor districts with no infrastructure or industry or jobs. All the homelands together constituted only 14 per cent of South Africa's land, while Blacks made up close to 80 per cent of the country's population. The resulting starvation and suffering was intense and widespread. In short, in a land with extensive natural resources, including diamonds and precious minerals, the majority of people lived in abject poverty.

The prosperous White minority defended its privileges by viewing Blacks as social inferiors. However, they also relied on a powerful system of military repression to maintain their power. Black protestors were routinely jailed, tortured and killed. Despite this reign of terror, Blacks collectively struggled for decades under the

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leadership of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela, and finally succeeded in coming to power and forming the government in 1994. Although the Constitution of post-apartheid South Africa has banned racial discrimination, economic capital still remains concentrated in White hands. Empowering the Black majority represents a continuing challenge for the new society.

“I have fought against White domination and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for

and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

*Nelson Mandela, 20 April 1964, Rivonia Trial.*

### **EXERCISE FOR TABLES 1 AND 2**

Table 1 shows the percentage of the population of each caste/ community that lives below the official ‘Poverty Line’ for 1999-2000. There are separate columns for rural and urban India.

Table 2 is organised in exactly the same way except that it shows the percentage of population living in affluence rather than in poverty. ‘Affluence’ is here defined as a monthly per person expenditure of Rs.1000 for rural India and Rs.2000 for urban India. This is equivalent to a family of five spending Rs.5000 per month in rural India and Rs.10,000 per month in urban India. Please take some time to study the tables carefully before you answer the questions below.

1. What is the percentage of the Indian population that was living below the poverty line in (a) Rural India and (b) Urban India?
2. Which caste/community group has the highest proportion of its members living in extreme poverty in a) rural and b) urban India? Which caste/community has the lowest percentage of population living in poverty?
3. Approximately how many times higher than the national average is the poverty percentage for each of the lower castes (ST, SC, OBC)? Is there a significant rural-urban difference?
4. Which caste/community has the lowest percentage of population living in affluence in rural and urban India respectively? How does this compare with

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the national average? The affluent population of 'Upper' caste Hindus is roughly how many times larger than the percentage for the 'lower' castes (ST, SC, OBC)?

5. What do these tables tell you about the relative position of the OBCs? Is there a significant rural-urban difference?

## **UNTOUCHABILITY**

'Untouchability' is an extreme and particularly vicious aspect of the caste system that prescribes stringent social sanctions against members of castes located at the bottom of the purity-pollution scale. Strictly speaking, the 'untouchable' castes are outside the caste hierarchy – they are considered to be so 'impure' that their mere touch severely pollutes members of all other castes, bringing terrible punishment for the former and forcing the latter to perform elaborate purification rituals. In fact, notions of 'distance pollution' existed in many regions of India (particularly in the south) such that even the mere presence or the shadow of an 'untouchable' person is considered polluting. Despite the limited literal meaning of the word, the institution of 'untouchability' refers not just to the avoidance or prohibition of physical contact but to a much broader set of social sanctions.

It is important to emphasise that the three main dimensions of untouchability – namely, (a) Exclusion, (b) Humiliation-subordination and (c) Exploitation are all equally important in defining the phenomenon. Although other (i.e., 'touchable') low castes are also subjected to subordination and exploitation to some degree, they do not suffer the extreme forms of exclusion reserved for 'untouchables.' Dalits experience forms of exclusion that are unique and not practised against other groups – for instance, being prohibited from sharing drinking water sources or participating in collective religious worship, social ceremonies and festivals. At the same time, untouchability may also involve forced *inclusion* in a subordinated role, such as being compelled to play the drums at a religious event. The performance of publicly visible acts of (self-)humiliation and subordination is an important part of the practice of untouchability. Common instances include the imposition of gestures of deference (such as taking off headgear, carrying footwear in the hand, standing with bowed head, not wearing clean or 'bright' clothes, and so on) as well as routinised abuse and humiliation. Moreover, untouchability is almost always associated with economic

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exploitation of various kinds, most commonly through the imposition of forced, unpaid (or under-paid) labour, or the confiscation of property. Finally, untouchability is a pan-Indian phenomenon, although its specific forms and intensity vary considerably across regions and socio-historical contexts.



### BOX 5.2

#### The Everyday Ordeal of a Dalit Scavenger

Among the estimated 8 million manual scavengers in India is Narayanamma, who work in a 400 seat public latrine in Anantpur municipality in Andhra Pradesh. From time to time, after the women using the toilet file out, Narayanamma and her fellow workers are called inside. There is no flush. The excrement only piles up at each seat, or flows into open drains. It is Narayanamma's job to collect it with her broom onto a flat, tin plate, and pile it into her basket. When the basket is filled, she carries it on her head to a waiting tractor-trolley parked at a distance of half a kilometre. And then she is back, waiting for the next call from the toilet. This goes on until about ten in the morning, when at last Narayanamma washes up, and returns home.

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“Ai, municipality come, clean this”, is how most people call out to Narayanamma and her fellow workers when they walk down the road. It is as though we do not have a name, she says. And often they cover their noses when we walk past, as though we smell. We have to wait until someone turns on a municipal tap, or works a hand-pump, when we fill water, so that these are not polluted by our touch. In the tea-stalls, we do not sit with others on the benches; we squat on the ground separately. Until recently, there were separate broken teacups for us, which we washed ourselves and these were kept apart only for our use. This continues to be the practice in villages even in the periphery of Anantpur, as in many parts of the state.

*Source: Adapted from Mander 2001: 38-39.*

The so-called ‘untouchables’ have been referred to collectively by many names over the centuries. Whatever the specific etymology of these names, they are all derogatory and carry a strongly pejorative charge. In fact, many of them continue to be used as forms of abuse even today, although their use is now a criminal offence. Mahatma Gandhi had popularised the term ‘Harijan’ (literally, children of God) in the 1930s to counter the pejorative charge carried by caste names.

However, the ex-untouchable communities and their leaders have coined another term, ‘Dalit’, which is now the generally accepted term for referring to these groups. In Indian languages, the term Dalit literally means ‘downtrodden’ and conveys the sense of an oppressed people. Though it was neither coined by Dr. Ambedkar nor frequently used by him, the term certainly resonates with his philosophy and the movement for empowerment that he led. It received wide currency during the caste riots in Mumbai in the early 1970s. The Dalit Panthers, a radical group that emerged in western India during that time, used the term to assert their identity as part of their struggle for rights and dignity.

## **STATE AND NON-STATE INITIATIVES ADDRESSING CASTE AND TRIBE DISCRIMINATION**

The Indian state has had special programmes for the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes since even before Independence. The ‘Schedules’ listing the castes and tribes recognised as deserving of special treatment because of the massive discrimination practiced against them were drawn up in 1935, by the British Indian government.



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After Independence, the same policies have been continued and many new ones added. Among the most significant additions is the extension of special programmes to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) since the early 1990s.

The most important state initiative attempting to compensate for past and present caste discrimination is the one popularly known as 'reservations'. This involves the setting aside of some places or 'seats' for members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in different spheres of public life. These include reservation of seats in the State and Central legislatures (i.e., state assemblies, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha); reservation of jobs in government service across all departments and public sector companies; and reservation of seats in educational institutions. The proportion of reserved seats is equal to the percentage share of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the total population. But for the OBCs this proportion is decided differently. The same principle is extended to other developmental programmes of the government, some of which are exclusively for the Scheduled Castes or Tribes, while others give them preference.

In addition to reservations, there have been a number of laws passed to end, prohibit and punish caste discrimination, specially untouchability. One of the earliest such laws was the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, which disallowed the curtailment of rights of citizens due solely to change of religion or caste. The most recent such law was the Constitution Amendment (Ninety Third Amendment) Act of 2005, which became law on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2006. Coincidentally, both the 1850 law and the 2006 amendment related to education. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is for introducing reservation for the Other Backward Classes in institutions of higher education, while the 1850 Act was used to allow entry of Dalits to government schools. In between, there have been numerous laws, of which the important ones are, of course, the Constitution of India itself, passed in 1950; and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. The Constitution abolished untouchability (Article 17) and introduced the reservation provisions mentioned above. The 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act revised and strengthened the legal provisions punishing acts of violence or humiliation against Dalits and adivasis. The fact that legislation was passed repeatedly on this subject is proof of the fact that the law alone cannot end a social practice. In fact, as you will have seen from newspapers and the media, cases of discrimination including atrocities against Dalits

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and adivasis, continue to take place all over India today. The particular case mentioned in Box 5.3 is only one example; you can find numerous others in the newspapers and media.

State action alone cannot ensure social change. In any case, no social group howsoever weak or oppressed is only a victim. Human beings are always capable of organising and acting on their own – often against very heavy odds – to struggle for justice and dignity. Dalits too have been increasingly active on the political, agitational, and cultural fronts. From the pre-Independence struggles and movements launched by people like Jyotiba Phule, Iyotheddas, Periyar, Ambedkar and others (See Chapter 3) to contemporary political organisations like the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh or the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti of Karnataka, Dalit political assertion has come a long way. (For an example of a contemporary struggle, see Box 5.3) Dalits have also made significant contributions to literature in several Indian languages, specially Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. (See Box 5.4 which features a short poem by the well known Marathi Dalit poet, Daya Pawar.)

### ACTIVITY 5.3

Obtain a copy of the Constitution of India. You can get it from your school library, from a bookshop, or from the Internet

(web address: <http://indiacode.nic.in/>).

Find and list all the articles and sections (laws) that deal with the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, or with caste-related problems like Untouchability. You can make a chart of the most important laws and put them up in your class.

### BOX 5.3

D for Dalit, D for Defiance

Gohana is a small, dusty town on the Sonapat-Rohtak highway of Haryana with billboards promising progress... Past the town square, Gohana's largest dalit neighbourhood, Valmiki Colony, has risen from the ashes. On 31 August 2005, it was looted and burnt by a mob of Jats after a Jat youth was killed in a scuffle with some dalit youngsters. Dalits had fled their homes fearing attacks by Jats after the murder; the patrolling police had chosen not to stop the mobs from torching 54 dalit houses. "The arson was the Jats' way of teaching the dalits a lesson," said Vinod

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Kumar, whose house was burnt. “The police, administration and the government are dominated by Jats; they simply watched our houses burn.” Five months later, the burnt houses have been rebuilt, their facades painted in bright pink, red and green. Marble tiles with bright pictures of Valmiki adorn the facades of every house, asserting the dalit identity of the residents. “We had to return. It is our home,” said Kumar, sitting on a newly acquired sofa in the drawing room of his house painted blue.

Kumar embodies the spirit of the dalits of Gohana. In his early 30s, he is not the scavenger the caste society ordered him to be, but a senior assistant in an insurance company. Most dalits have embraced education and stepped across the line of control of the caste system. “There are many of us who have a masters degree and work in private and government jobs. Most of our boys go to school and so do the girls,” he said. [...] The young men of the Valmiki Colony are not the stereotyped, submissive, suffering dalits that one would traditionally expect to encounter. Dressed in imitation Nike shoes and Wrangler jeans, their body language is defiant. However, the journey of upward social mobility remains tough for the vast majority of landless dalits in Haryana. “Most boys drop out after high school because of acute poverty,” said Sudesh Kataria, an assistant engineer working for a multinational. He has a diploma in electrical engineering from the Industrial Training Institute, Gurgaon. Kataria’s best friend at ITI, a Jat, once invited him to a family wedding but insisted that he shouldn’t reveal his identity. “At the wedding a guest asked me about my caste and I lied. Then he asked me about my village and I told him the truth. He knew my village was a dalit village.” A fight broke out between the hosts and the guests — how can they let a dalit in? “They washed the chair I sat on and threw me out,” Kataria recalls.

Kataria wants a new life for the dalits— he campaigns through out the villages of Gurgaon with other educated dalits. “Our people will rise, stronger and powerful. We need to unite. And once we unite and fight back, there will be no Gohanas or Jhajjars. Not any more.”

*(Source: Adapted from an article by Basharat Peer, in Tehelka February 18, 2006)*

## **BOX 5.4**

### **The City**

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by Daya Pawar

One day someone digs up a twentieth century city and ends on this observation.

Here's an interesting inscription:

'This water tap is open to all castes and religions'. What could it have meant:

That this society was divided?

That some were high while others were low? Well, all right, then this city deserved burying— Why did they call it the machine age?

Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century .

### **THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES**

Untouchability was the most visible and comprehensive form of social discrimination. However, there were a large group of castes that were of low status and were also subjected to varying levels of discrimination short of untouchability. These were the service and artisanal castes who occupied the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. The Constitution of India recognises the possibility that there may be groups other than the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes who suffer from social disadvantages. These groups – which

need not be based on caste alone, but generally are identified by caste – were described as the 'socially and educationally backward classes'. This is the constitutional basis of the popular term 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), which is in common use today.

Like the category of the 'tribe' (see Chapter 3), the OBCs are defined negatively, by what they are not. They are neither part of the 'forward' castes at the upper end of the status spectrum, nor of the Dalits at the lower end. But since caste has entered all the major Indian religions and is not confined to Hinduism alone, there are also members of other religions who belong to the backward castes and share the same traditional occupational identification and similar or worse socio-economic status.

For these reasons, the OBCs are a much more diverse group than the Dalits or adivasis. The first government of independent India under Jawaharlal Nehru appointed a commission to look into measures for the welfare of the OBCs. The First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar submitted its report in 1953. But the political climate at the time led to the report being sidelined. From the mid-

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fifties, the OBC issue became a regional affair pursued at the state rather than the central level.

The southern states had a long history of backward caste political agitation that had started in the early twentieth century. Because of these powerful social movements, policies to address the problems of the OBCs were in place long before they were discussed in most northern states. The OBC issue returned to the central level in the late 1970s after the Emergency when the Janata Party came to power. The Second Backward Classes Commission headed by B.P. Mandal was appointed at this time. However, it was only in 1990, when the central government decided to implement the ten-year old Mandal Commission report, that the OBC issue became a major one in national politics.

Since the 1990s we have seen the resurgence of lower caste movements in north India, among both the OBCs and Dalits. The politicisation of the OBCs allows them to convert their large numbers – recent surveys show that they are about 41% of the national population – into political influence. This was not possible at the national level before, as shown by the sidelining of the Kalelkar Commission report, and the neglect of the Mandal Commission report.

The large disparities between the upper OBCs (who are largely landed castes and enjoy dominance in rural society in many regions of India) and the lower OBCs (who are very poor and disadvantaged, and are often not very different from Dalits in socio-economic terms) make this a difficult political category to work with. However, the OBCs are severely under-represented in all spheres except landholding and political representation (they have a large number of MLAs and MPs). Although the upper OBCs are dominant in the rural sector, the situation of urban OBCs is much worse, being much closer to that of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes than to the upper castes.