UNIT 30  SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

30.0 INTRODUCTION

Historians of Modern India have keenly debated about the kind of social change brought about under the colonial rule. There is no doubt about qualitative changes in the nature of administration and economy initiated by the intervention of British administrators. However, British administrators also borrowed the notions of rank, status and hierarchy from the indigenous cultural and religious traditions. The early colonial rule may have been a period of military conquest and economic plunder but it was not one of clumsy and ham-fisted social intervention by rulers imbued with a sense of racial superiority. Early British orientalists did not regard Indian culture and traditions as inferior. There was, however, a definite bias towards studying the more elite and exclusivist traditions of upper caste Hindus and respectable Muslim classes rather than the more flexible and all-encompassing religious and cultural traditions of lower orders of society. This was reflected in privileging of knowledge of Brahmanical texts and pronouncements of ulama or Muslim religious leaders rather than the uncodified cultural traditions of subordinated social groups. The principles of caste-hierarchy and ritual distinction helped in settlement of countryside by providing ideological support to British scholars and administrators, who, making use of a neo-Brahmanical interpretations of Indian society set about the task of rank-ordering indigenous social groups in various regions. The colonial sociology involved multiple changes in the social structure of colonial India. The social relations affected in the process of consolidation of colonial rule ranged from familial domain to that of community, from personal relationship to larger linkages in public spheres. One could argue that notions of status, hierarchies both indigenous and those imported from metropolis permeated these intricate and many-sided relationships. Even when a formal equality was professed between kinship and caste groups under the colonial regime, two broad categories of privileged and deprived existing side by side were a norm.

The present unit proposes to explore the nature of social discrimination and its diverse forms in different parts of India. The interface between colonial state and society on the one hand and relationships among Indians on the other hand provided the context within which social discrimination was practised. Social discrimination and backwardness existed in India even before the advent of British rule. But the formation and development of colonial state heralded the process of major social and administrative changes, which remoulded many of the pre-existing social hierarchies. We wish to explore how the new colonial milieu influenced various forms of social discrimination along race, caste, class and gender. In other words, we hope to pinpoint the structural basis of institutionalised discrimination.
30.1 NOTIONS OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY

The British colonial rulers came to India imbued with the spirit of liberal humanism. This liberalism defined white European men as the maker of history, the creators of empires, the founders of modern nations, the conquerors of backward people and masters of sciences and technology. Naturally, they placed the people who did not make progress or lagged behind in time at the lower ladder of development. The colonial subjects were simply written out of history, out of modernity and into a time-less primitiveness-Eden-like, simple and permanently fixed. The colonial rulers used the domestic ideology of gender to demonstrate backwardness of India and its inhabitants. The European white men were strong, active, and intellectually fertile with a sense of self-control and discipline while the colonial Indian subjects were effeminate, fearful, passive and sentimental. In other words, British imperial experience brought into prominence the ‘masculine’ virtues of the master race and devalued ‘feminized’ colonial subjects. The British sahibs maintained their privileges and segregation not merely in ideological realm but in various fields. The British in India maintained their segregated and dominant position in India. They not only built their bungalows separately but even their shopping malls, recreational clubs were also distinct. The relationship with Indians was established for the purpose of governance. The British as administrators, military personnel’s and even as civilians demanded regulated behaviour from Indians. It was presumed that in hierarchical society, Indians were bound to adhere to their customs and they had no rights to appropriate symbols of ruling class.

The urban morphology exhibited this clearly. The Europeans lived in large segregated sprawling houses with surrounding lawns and separately even from indigenous elite and mercantile groups. Despite the notions of rule of law and equality before law, the British community in India opposed Ilbert Bill, which sought to empower Indian magistrates in the countryside to try British subjects. The Indians were denied every opportunity to join the privileged Indian Civil Service, which was dominated by the graduates from elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The white sahibs were to be carried around in palanquins in the early phase of colonial rule. The post was accessible to them even before sorting out of post. The Post Office Act (1854) charged double postal rates from indigenous newspapers to that charged on the imported English newspapers. While the liberal traditions wished to recreate India as the mirror image of British society, in actual practice India was governed with an iron hand and Utilitarians also declared that India was not capable of governing itself. In order to establish their control over the forest resources of India, the British forest bureaucracy discouraged slash and burn cultivation practised by many indigenous tribal groups and penalized small scale hunting by such social groups, which used to be a major source of proteins in their diets. But, organized hunting was cultivated as a sport among the members of civil and military colonial bureaucracy to demonstrate their racial distinctiveness.

In the 1830s F.J.Shore, a judge in upper India resented that ‘natives of rank’ visited the rooms of Englishmen with their shoes on. He was adhering to the practise where in British had noticed that only rich Indians generally wore shoes and their helpers and subordinate went barefoot. The complaint of F.J.Shore rested on the notion that British were the superiors in India. He attributed the behaviour of Indians to ‘the bad manners of the natives of Calcutta’ belonging to “an inferior order’. Shore also regretted that it was the carelessness of Europeans and their unfamiliarity with ‘eastern etiquette’, which had resulted in usage of practice. In their public pronouncements and patronized newspapers, British often ridiculed Indians. For instance Tribune, which was started by Dayal Singh Majithia in 1881, exposed the misdeeds of administrators in Punjab. In a series of articles, the paper exposed the deputy commissioner, C.A.Roe of Multan in handling the issue of cow-slaughter. The
Tribune noted that decisions of C.A.Roe had resulted in communal riots in 1881. It was strongly refuted by the Civil and Military Gazette. In one of its article, it dubbed Multanis as liars. It accused them of exaggerating and fabricating actual incidents.

The rulers also believed in public display of their power. The colonial rulers made use of the many ceremonial trappings of pre-colonial sovereignty for this purpose. The imperial durbar in 1911 was specifically organized to display their racial superiority. In that year, King George V & his queen came to India and King George was formally crowned as the King Emperor of India. To celebrate the occasion, the Government of India decided to hold the imperial Durbar in which the leading Princess by offering homage would express their respect to the imperial majesties. Before the actual ceremony, rehearsal was also held to explain the proper form of offering homage to King Emperor and his consort by the Princess. However Gaekwad of Baroda could not attend the rehearsal. On his behalf, his brother took notes. On the day of the imperial Durbar, the Gaekwad also offered his homage. He came wearing a plain knee-length jacket, red turban and white European trousers. He also carried an English style walking stick. In offering his obeisance, Gaekwad however neglected the Princess and while retracing several steps, he turned back and walked down the steps swinging his stick. It was this behaviour which was dubbed by the Times reporter as seditious. Very soon English newspapers in India and England started heated discussion on the behaviour of Gaekwad. In analysing this episode Bernard S. Cohn has pointed out that use of a walking stick had evoked strong reaction among the British because they regarded it as marker of white sahib’s identity.

30.2 COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SUBORDINATED OTHERS

An understanding of process of social discrimination requires some background of pre-colonial hierarchy and rank ordering of society as well as transformations initiated by the colonial state. In the historiography of modern India, works on colonialism such as those of Thomas Metcalf, Nicholas Dirks and Partha Chatterji have explored its institutional and ideological basis. Bernard S. Cohn in particular has shown that colonial rule was also a cultural construct. The very process of acquiring information about Indians was connected with strengthening and legitimisation of colonial rule in India. The process started after the annexation of Bengal in eighteenth century. The interests of British administrators in knowledge of Indian law, culture and religion were intertwined with requirements of running the colonial dispensation. Colonialism reconstructed cultural forms and social institutions like caste to create a line of difference and demarcation between themselves as European modern and the colonized Indian traditional subjects. In such production and identification of Indian traditions, caste-hierarchy was recast as the spiritual essence of India that mediated and regulated the private domain. Caste-ridden Indian society was depicted as different from the European civil society because this institution was opposed to the basic premises of individualism. The operation of this pre-colonial source of identification and sense of loyalty could easily be used to justify the rule of modern colonial administrators. So, according to Dirks, it was the colonial rule of India that organized the ‘social difference and deference’ solely in terms of caste. Caste hierarchy and ritual ranks in their various manifestations and forms were not unchangeable in the pre-colonial times. There were also non-caste affiliations and social identities such as kinship networks linked by matrimonial alliances, commercial activities and state service and patronage in pre-colonial times. However, caste was also a typical marker of identity and a powerful social metaphor that designated higher and lower orders. The penal system of Peshwas, for instance, punished culprits according to caste status. Caste, therefore, was not merely a fabrication of British rulers designed to demean and subjugate Indians. It, however, did definitely helped colonial rulers in justifying their rule to ‘civilise’ and ‘improve’ the ‘fallen people’. The evangelicals condemned the...
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‘Brahmanical tyranny’ and the colonial state also used the principles of caste-hierarchy as a kind of bulwark against anarchy and as an upholder of social order. Till 1860s, tenets of social policy centred on abolition of Sati and Female infanticide and this was connected with ‘civilizing mission’ of the rulers. Their notion of patriarchy made them conclude that they alone were capable of maintaining a rational social order based on the idea of material and moral progress in India. As India became the direct colony of Britain in 1858, rulers stressed racial superiority in the public domain. Viewed from this perspective, social discrimination can be described as those policies of British rule, which denied equality and respect to Indians. Social discrimination was also inherent in the assumptions of rulers revolving around customs and behavioural pattern of Indians. However it also remains a fact that upper castes and dominant groups in India endorsed some of these practices. Social discrimination was, in this sense, rooted in exploitation, denial of identity to subordinate groups. It was also rooted in practice of segregation and imposition of subordination on exploited and oppressed groups.

30.3 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES BASED ON CASTE

In this section, we deal with the changing face of caste during nineteenth century. The colonial rule was consolidated and it acquired powers of intimidation and observation that influenced the Indian subjects. It was in these conditions that caste became the measure of the new ranking order. Thus, the tribal social groups like Bhils, Kolis and Ramoshis became dependent labourers while the privileged landowning and trading castes Hindus were treated as high, pure and superior. With their notions of private property and privileging of settled agriculturists, the Britishers gave tangible force to distinctions between ways of life that had not previously been analytically ranked, compared and standardized. It was not merely the census, which enumerated Indians, and fixed caste identities, there were also several policies adopted by British administrators, which dubbed some tribal and caste groups as criminal. Stewart N. Gordon’s study of the Bhils highlights this change in their life. During the Mughal period, Bhils residing in isolated tract in northeast Maharashtra had moved into the Khandesh valley. During the rule of Marathas they started collecting levies from passing caravans. In order to protect travellers, some Bhils leaders were granted the right to collect duties from travellers. Gradually they started working as watchmen. Many of them settled on the plains and became peasant cultivators. When the British controlled central India in 1818, they formulated policies, which perpetrated stereotypes against Bhils and their ways of food production. While land was given to Zamindars, Bhils residing in hills were without permanent sources of income. They were seen as criminal. The very fact that they lived in hills generated fear among British. John Malcolm dubbed them as outlaws and ‘enemies of order and peace’. They were seen as those who cherished their predatory rights. This led British to dub them as ‘criminal tribe’. John Briggs, commissioner of Khandesh harped on this rigid identity for Bhils. Subsequently, under the policy of Elphinstone, who was the governor of Bombay, Bhils were gradually settled in plains but it remained a fact that those residing in hills remained segregated and many of them became the victims of agrarian bondage as agricultural labourers for the landowning Hindu castes.

During the nineteenth century, colonial administrators classified the subcontinent’s ‘castes’, ‘tribes’ and races in terms of importance and desirable quality defined as per the ‘modern science’ and discovered tenets of ‘Hindu religious faith’. These classificatory schemes served the needs of British administration, which wished to represent itself as protector of the ‘sanctity of contract and private property’, and settled agriculturists against the ravages of Pindari-bands and other so called predators.
The thrifty husbandman, the pious man of trade and the chaste ‘clean-caste’ wife became ideal inhabitants of India and those primitive tribes, pastoralists and low-caste untouchables who shared little in the domain of modern progress were placed at a lower ladder in the newly constructed taxonomy for social groups. In the pre-colonial periods, birth and moral attributes did play a role in determining a person’s caste status but there was also considerable openness and fluidity. Now, in the middle of colonial rule, Brahmanical standards of piousness, purity and refinement of manners were applied more vigorously to the caste-hierarchy. This finely tuned difference created rigorous barriers between those of ‘clean’ caste, and those stigmatised as innately degraded, unclean and polluting. Defined as the fixed attributes of birth and rank, jati and varna ideals were used to coerce and dominate, especially as rural elites tried to maintain authority over tenants and dependent labourers. But while new disabilities were, thus, imposed on lower castes and tribal social groups, the volatile and unpredictable colonial milieu also simultaneously offered new opportunities and new set of material and ideological resources which could be utilized by the less disadvantaged to move up and demand better entitlement to the resources. In the formal sense, the colonial rule professed equality between its subjects. But this did not mean an end to social discrimination. The insistence on contract, enforceable by law and new courts, meant that those with better resources could consolidate their position by manipulating the new colonial institutional framework.

The local rural magnates in different parts of the country tried to claim a right to demand servitude and deference from landless labourers or subordinated kaminis and other balittedars (clients) as well as from the marginal tribal cultivators. Much of this was done with extra-economic coercion using strict norms of hierarchy and pollution-barrier. In large parts of Madras Presidency the greater part of agricultural labourers, belonging to lower castes, had been reduced to near servitude. Large parts of Tamil country as well as Malabar and Kanara region witnessed growth of this type of agrarian bondage. In some districts, the conditions of untouchable Pallans or Paraiyans were really terrible. In this part, The British legal and judicial system reinforced the traditional caste institution and social distinctions, giving a fresh lease of life to the power, privileges and authority of upper castes. The Brahman landlords, who did not engage themselves in any kind of manual unclean, ritually polluting labour processes utilized the services of either tenant-cultivators or employed bonded labourers in their fields. This type of agrarian servitude was also quite common among the Cherumans of Malabar where they were treated like slaves and could be sold, mortgaged and rented out. There were groups outside the agricultural sector in the countryside who provided various kinds of services to the upper castes and classes. The Bhangi ‘scavengers’ of north India, the Vannan washermen of Malabar, the Chamar leather-workers of north India and the Shannars or toddy-tappers of Tamilnad. Various social disabilities were imposed on such people who performed indispensable defiling tasks for the purity-conscious upper caste Hindus. They were forbidden entry into temples. They could not make use of public wells. They were also denied use of certain types of clothes, ornaments and other paraphernalia of upper caste people, to walk freely in certain quarters and localities. A Nadar of Tamilnad could not approach a Brahman within twenty-four paces. Their women were not allowed to cover their breasts. There were also much larger group of dependent rural labourers such as Chamars in the Gangetic plain, the Mahars in the western India and Paraiyan, Pala, Mala, Holeya and Cheruma in the south who were depicted as permanently unclean and impure by virtue of the defiling labour which they performed, not as free wage labour but as providers of compulsory labour services to local rural magnates or proprietors. However, much of this ritually defined subordination of these lower social orders was the creation of colonial economic penetration because until well into nineteenth century, settled agriculture had not completely overshadowed the pastoral and tribal ways of life and production systems. Expansion of cultivation in less fertile tracts involving dry crops required few labourers apart from the immediate kin of peasant family. There were, of course, caste-specific conventions and norms of
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Pollution-removal acts and services that provided the model the working of village baluta system in the western India and jajmani relationships elsewhere in the pre-colonial scheme of things. This also had created a separate category of village menial servants known as kamins, praja and avagars in different regional contexts. The relationship of these social groups with their patrons was not always harmonious and it is doubtful whether their share in the material and ritual assets of the indigenous society were so well protected as sometimes depicted. The famine records of nineteenth century demonstrate that they were, in fact, first to perish in large numbers in case of calamity. Yet, in more recent colonial times, these lowly placed kamins and group of dependent labourers, accustomed to limited entitlements, found that their lot was worse off as their former patrons abandoned the existing webs of rights and services, leaving former dependents to fend for themselves in a presumably casteless labour market.

Sometime it is believed that untouchability and rigid concepts of pollution were basically a reflection of traditional rural India and the colonial milieu created new avenues of opportunities in the form of urban industrial workplaces and modern western education. There is no doubt that social transformation linked to colonialism brought many non-elite migrants into colonial coastal towns and industrial and new administrative centres. Moving to cities, leather workers tended to be employed as low-paid labourers in tanning and shoe-making factories. Doms or the traditional north Indian funerary specialists took up the jobs as mortuary attendants at dissecting rooms of the colonial hospitals. In cotton mills also mill hands were generally from social groups that had been identified as ‘impure’ or unclean. In the rural settings, these groups faced conditions of servitude and bondage and paradoxically, when they moved to urban as unskilled labourers, the Bhangi, the Mahar and the Chamar also encountered caste norms. The nature of casual labour in the factories, shipyards and tanneries tended to increase the power of pollution barrier and social life in such workplaces also reinforced their lowly, impure and untouchable status. Thus, we find a close correlation between caste norms and ritually governed entitlement to resources. Moreover, while most of these social norms and practices predate colonial rule, the latter in fact, entailed certain changes in the position of subordinate social groups in different parts of the country.

30.4 CERTAIN SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF SERVITUDE

Most of the agricultural labourers in south Gujarat belonged to the tribal groups like Dubla, Naika and Dhodia communities. Many among them worked as halis or bonded labourers. Halis were like permanent estate servants of their masters known as dhaniamas. They would become bonded labourer in perpetuity for a trifling sum of money. They were like unpaid labourers who did all type of manual begar for the local rural magnates. M.B. Desai estimated that in Surat district about one fifth of tribal labourers were halis. The upper caste women of landowning castes like Anavils, Rajputs and Patidars could not work in the fields due to social taboo associated with manual labour. Such groups, therefore, employed bonded labour on a large scale. The caste divisions in south Gujarat had got crystallized into two major categories: the kaliparaj and the ujaliparaj. The ujaliparaj comprised the higher castes such as Brahman, Bania and Rajputs whereas the kaliparaj included the lower castes such as Dublas, Dheds, Dhodias and Naikas. The distinction was clearly visible in the various aspects of their social life including food habits, literacy and religious beliefs. More importantly, however, it was a matter of entitlement to various material and productive assets and resources especially agricultural land and expanding networks of markets that were created by the colonial economy and differential access to it for various sections of rural society. Similar class cleavages were also discernible in the other parts of western and southern India where untouchable lower castes, tribal groups and marginal
tenant-cultivators suffered from insidious social discrimination. *Hali* system of keeping bonded labour in south Gujarat was permeated by notion of patronage and was based on use of labour-services of subordinate families in perpetuity by the dominant landlords of that locality. According to Jan Breman, Hali was the term used for a farm servant who along with his family was in the permanent employment of a landlord, a *dhaniamo*. Such form of labour employment was everlasting and was transferred from one generation of farm servants to next generation. The practice had its genesis in incurring of debt by an agriculture labour for marriage or any other social ceremony. The debt was obtained from a master who was willing to employ him. Over the period of time, as debt increased, enduring oppression of farm servant also became fixed and preset, as the *hali* would never be in a position to repay his debt. According to Jan Breman, established service relationship could end only if another master was willing to take over the *hali*. The *Hali* system governed the social relationships between Dublas and Anavil Brahmins, who were not priest as in the traditional social hierarchy. Many of them had become landlords even before the Mughal period. Being of the highest castes, they did not participate and contribute in the defiling manual labour that was so vital for agricultural production. Employing *halis* belonging to Dublas caste facilitated their dodging of such menial tasks, which would degrade their position in the caste-hierarchy. *Hali* apart from working as farm servant often performed other duties assigned by his master. His wife also served as maid in the house of the master undertaking all domestic drudgery. His children also served the master especially in tasks involving animal husbandry.

The continuation of *Hali* system was the result of not merely the exploitative power of landlords. It was rooted in the established social relationship based on patronage and the so-called affection, generosity and intercession of their semi-feudal masters and a 'permanent security of livelihood' for the *halis* could be assured. Thus, their servitude was mixed up with a sense of gratitude. Alongside, *Hali* system guaranteed dominant status of anavil Brahmins. During nineteenth century, many of them were involved in sugar plantation. As their income increased, many of them married their daughters into the families of Desais. The employment of *halis* provided them with continuous supply of agricultural labour.

The conditions of lower social orders in other parts of the country were no better. The Chandels in Bengal, the Doms in Bihar and Bhuniyas in south Bihar also reveal that similar scrupulous discriminatory processes of prejudice and inequity were at work. The Namsudras of Bengal, earlier known as Chandels were relegated to the position of Antyaja, for whom even service castes such as barbers, washermen and sometimes lowly placed scavengers refused to perform services. The Bhuniyas provided labour services to the high caste *Maliks* as bonded labourers and they were incorporated as *kamias* in the social hierarchy. The changes associated with colonialism, thus, represented a real shift in both the language and the lived reality of rural social life. The landowning local magnates who had earlier defined their respectable status predominantly in terms of protected landed rights and privileged military service in some parts of the country, now buttressed demands for labour services by imposing grand codes of ritual servility onto an increasing assortment of landless farm servants and former tribal share-croppers who had not previously been bracketed with 'untouchables'. The colonial policy-makers helped such social engineering by inventing customary obligations for those defined low in caste terms. The protection provided to their landed rights by the colonial regime further encouraged such elites to demand *begar* and *vethi* from disadvantaged social groups.

### 30.5 GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Several studies have explored gender relation in colonial India. The position of women within households was marked by subordination at a general level. The institution of
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Patriarchy and the legal machinery in public sphere further reinforced this subordination. Radhika Singha, Tanika Sarkar and Kumkum Sangari have highlighted these aspects in their works. Urvashi Butalia has pointed out particularly how communal riots violated bodies of women. The print media especially newspapers during colonial rule clearly indicates that women were essentially seen as marker of honour of community and nation. They were not regarded as independent individuals capable of actualising their innate potential. In a male dominated social arrangement, any attempt by them to marry out of caste or with males of different religion evoked widespread resentment. Seen from the perspective of women, social discrimination was practised both at the familial and public levels. The denial of an independent identity amounted to subjection of women. Here it is also important of point out that social religious reform movement focused mainly on the plight of upper caste women. The fate of women and men belonging to lower stratum of society remained neglected. Here women suffered from several discriminatory practises, which were, imposed in the name of customs by the appropriation of upper castes norms and values. Even the stress on the education of women enabled them to become better wives, mothers and managers of their affluent households. The social reformers evoked the vision of an ideal social world, which was at variance from the actual world in which they lived. Therefore, their moral world was conservative and hierarchical, a framework comprising of high and lowly, each in their place. In this male vision, women were placed at the margins of public space. They had to be subordinated even within the realm of domesticity. In some cases, it was the fear of Christian conversion that led to creation of institutional and organizational networks to spread female education. Women had no genuine say over theologies, educational curricula and administrative structures in such institutions.

Sometimes, when the reformers tried to reclaim ‘golden age of equality’, a time when women were educated and could participate equally in rituals with men; in such discourses also they stressed the traditional and venerated ideal of pativarta and the social role of women were still moulded by high caste, middle class patriarchal values. In the religious and social discourses, women were relegated to the margins of sacred space. More importantly, their sexuality, their forms of entertainments and their habits were to be controlled in the name of traditions and customs of lineage. In order to recover a lost past, reformers paint a picture of contemporary moral and cultural degeneration and a homogenized image of traditional women. For the nationalist intelligentsia, securing image of domesticity through a moral and physical rigorous confinement to maintain the fidelity and chastity of women became a new rationale for the subordination of women. The Victorian colonial image of women also equally emphasized the authority of a new reformed ideological community in enforcing these notions of proprieties and contributed to fortification of women subordination in domestic and public space.

30.6 CLOTHES AND CUSTOMS AS MARKER OF SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

In any society, clothes worn by people of different age, gender and class background act as marker of specific identity. Such identity is reflected not merely in familial space but also in public domain. In colonial India, wearing of specific clothes was connected with maintenance of social distinction. In many parts of India, low castes and tribals were not allowed to wear clothes used by higher castes. It severely restricted the mobility of women belonging to lower castes and tribes. They were subjected to numerous exploitative practices, which were justified in the name of prevailing customs.

In the state of Tranvancore, low caste shanars who identified themselves as Nadars were engaged in menial and other informal and casual jobs. They were palm tree tappers, carters and agricultural labourers. Many of them were tenants of Nair
landlords. In social hierarchy, they were placed below Nairs who were the landowners and performed military service in the state. Social norms in society were enforced by the state by pointing out specific code of respect and avoidance behaviour. Thus a low caste person while approaching a Brahmin had to speak from a specific distance. In case of Nadars, they were required to stand at the distance of thirty-six paces from the Nambudri Brahmin. Nadars were also not allowed to wear shoes, golden ornaments and carry umbrellas. Their women were not allowed to cover the upper parts of their bodies. All castes below the rank of Nair could wear single cloth of rough texture, covering their bodies from waist up to the knee.

The situation changed when missionaries in Travancore started spreading Christianity. They were concerned about clothes worn by Nadar women. Under the influence of Christianity, many Nadar women started wearing long clothes. Many of them opted for Nair style breast cloth. It evoked strong reaction from Nair community. During 1820s many Nadar women wearing such clothes were attacked and were beaten up in the markets. There was widespread social tension in 1859. The Maharaja of Travancore responded to social tension by issuing a proclamation on 26 July 1859. Under this proclamation all communities were allowed to dress in coarse cloth. They were also allowed to cover their bosoms. However the proclamation also directed Nadar women not to wear breast clothes identical to that worn by Nair women. Thus even the Maharaja of Travancore believed in maintaining social distinction. However the response of Nadars was connected with their attempt to enhance their social status. R.N.Jesudas however has linked this issue with a wider class struggle in the state of Travancore.

30.7 RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

The social history of colonial India is replete with instances of discrimination of untouchables and other low castes in the name of religion and established social norms. The Brahmanical domination and ritual purity of upper castes was maintained in villages and urban areas in numerous ways. Even when reformers sought to break caste restrictions, it did not work. For instance, during 1920s Shuddhi movement by the Arya Samaj sought to remove caste divisions. For this purpose, purification ceremonies were held and inter-caste dining was encouraged. However, Swami Shardhanand noted that though upper caste leaders participated in such ceremonies but they did not participate in inter caste-dining ceremonies.

In many parts of India, untouchables were not allowed to enter temples and other sacred places. In villages they were allowed to live only on the outskirts of village residential area. They were not allowed to fetch water from village wells. Under colonial rule, even when traditional ties broke down in the wake of growing economic penetration of colonial economy, it was seen that there were virtually no avenues for low castes to ensure make use of expanding opportunities as they had no entitlements to land and other non-material resources. In Madras, Punjab and Maharasthra, some individuals and small sections among lower castes had tried to improve their conditions but by and large they did not have access to education. Even when they had appropriate skills, in factories they could be employed only in tasks considered to be polluting. For instance in Jullundhur, Kanpur, many were employed in tanneries and shoe-making factories but upper castes maintained distance from them.

There was growing realisation among exploited people that they were discriminated against by dominant and powerful castes due to their lowly ritual status. Non-Brahmin movements such as that of satyasodhaks under Jyotiba Phule in western India and activities of other reformers and leaders like B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi sharpened such consciousness. The above-mentioned trends can be exemplified by
analysing the position of Mahars in Maharashtra. In villages, Mahars were employed as watchmen, wall menders, messengers, servants of village headmen and government officials. They were also engaged in the task of removing cattle carcasses. The families of Mahars performed these duties from one generation to another. They were not allowed to question their subordinate position. In the mid-nineteenth century, a Mahar boy from Dharwar sought admission in a government school. He was not granted admission. For the redressal of his grievances, the ‘untouchables’ of Dharwar appealed to the Education Department of Bombay province. In 1857, they also petitioned to the government of India at Calcutta. However, his petition was dismissed on the ground that there was strong opposition from higher castes. In 1890, Gopal Baba Walangkar, and some the retired army soldiers from Ratnagiri submitted a petition to the ‘Shankaracharya and other Hindu leaders’. In their petition they listed the disadvantages suffered by the ‘untouchables’. They also pointed out that the ‘untouchables’ did not have access to schools. They were denied stay in dhamshalas and were not allowed to participate in trade.

Krishnaji Keshav Damle vividly described the social stigma attached to ‘untouchability’ in the nineteenth century in his poem:

The First question of the Untouchables Boy
The children of untouchables
Poor, gay, playing on the road side—
A Brahmin came from far
To the simple, kind what should he say:
‘O you brats of Mahars, move away
Be gone! What are you playing at, you lout?
Run and give way to the Brahmin!’
The boy fled— who would dare stay!
One amongst them did;
The wicked Brahmin brandished his club and shouted,
“Ass! Thy shadow must not fell on me,
Get thee gone, or else this “sweet present”!”
The kid too slunk homes words,
Musing——
“What if my shadow fell on him?
What’s so wrong about it?”
At home he asked the question to his mother.
The poor mother said:
“We are low and they are high,
When you see them, you had “better step aside”

In Bengal, though economic position of Namasudras were not identical in all parts of province, but they were subjected to numerous social disabilities. These affirmed the dominant position of Bhadr alloks. For instance, their own Brahmans performed all the religious and social ceremonies of Namasudras. In social feasts they had to sit separately and were expected to clean their dishes. Their living space was also segregated. The voices of many Namasudra recounted such experiences. Citing his
childhood experiences, a Namasudra pointed out that his mother worked in the houses of Kayastha landlords in Burdwan. He also accompanied his mother. His sister also helped in looking after the children of landlords. However, one day he saw the eldest son of the landlord urinating in the house. He also did the same but his act infuriated the landlady. She thrashed him. After words, she bathed ceremonially as she had touched an untouchable.

It was presumed by dominant upper castes in Punjab that they had the right to demand labour from Kamins. The latter worked as scavengers and agricultural labourers. Over the period of time, such exploitation was resented. In 1927, in village Baghiana in Lahore district, Kamins belonging to the Balmiki community refused to continue their traditional work of the flaying of dead animals. Against this decision, landlords offered joint contract to Balmikis at lower rate to do the work. When it was refused, landlords resorted to boycott of Balmikis. The latter were not allowed to use the village tank, thoroughfares and common lands. They were also attacked and were not allowed to lodge complaint at the local police station.

30.8 SUMMARY

On the basis of certain instances, an insight into the processes of social discrimination based on caste, gender and unequal entitlement to resources has been provided. These discriminations were practised under the norms of ritual distinctions and patriarchal ideology. Subordinate social groups also experienced unequal entitlements to land, educational opportunities and other non-material community resources. It was these lived social experiences, which provided the rationale for the resistance against the disadvantaged position inflicted on some social groups by the colonial rule. The institutionalised discrimination was discernible in social relationships in rural India. However, what was considered as natural and inevitable by dominant castes was eventually perceived discriminatory by the lower castes and this opened the terrain for contestation between them.

30.9 GLOSSARY

Hali System : It denoted relationship between Anavil Brahmin landlords and Dublas farm labourers.

Bhadraloks : Upper Castes, mainly Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaidyas in Bengal

Kamins : Untouchables in Punjab who are required to offer begar/forced labour to upper caste landlords.

Mahars : Untouchable caste in Maharashtra.

Dhaniamo : Landlord-creditor in South Gujarat.

30.10 EXERCISES

1) “British Rulers denied social respect and equality to Indians rulers for upholding the dominant position” Comment.

2) How did women of lower caste suffer in Indian society during nineteenth century?

3) Describe Hali system in South Gujarat

4) Recount some of the experiences of untouchables pointing out social discrimination in colonial India.