
UNIT 5 SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND STRATIFICATION

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Learning Objectives:

After reading this unit, the learner would be able to understand:

- how in tribal societies status and identities are conferred and the manner in which power is distributed in society and authority is maintained;
- the varieties of ways in which societies differentiate between kinds of personhood and the distribution of power among various units of society, individual and collective;
- the nature of authority and the difference between legitimate and non-legitimate power as well as about the institutionalisation of power; and
- the actual processes through which power manifests itself, the tools of control, and the ideological apparatus that legitimises and justifies inequality and differentiation.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Human beings are biologically the same but in every society, there are ways in which one human is differentiated from the other; the term differentiation is used for a simple 'difference' that may be at the level of individuals or at the level of groups and refers to identities. Stratification on the other hand is defined as inequality or an arrangement of individuals or groups into high or low, the word strata being analogous to 'layering'. Thus while 'differentiation' may be understood as horizontal, stratification is always vertical; in real life, these may overlap such that certain kinds of differences also translate into inequality. The most important character of differentiation and stratification is that both are culturally constructed, historically situated, and arbitrary in nature. There is never any real basis for any kind of hierarchy, except one that is arbitrarily imposed by those in power and justified by ideologies that are maintained and continued by the very same power structure. Over historical epochs, the power structures may change

as the ideologies that inform them transform due to a variety of reasons that may be either internal or external to the society in question. Thus, while different societies exhibit different forms of differentiation and stratification, these are both dynamic and shifting and may change over time. Secondly, differentiation and hierarchies are subject to interpretations and may be understood differently by different members of the same society, particularly if they happen to be holding contradictory positions in the power hierarchy.

5.2 EGALITARIAN SOCIETIES

An egalitarian society implies one with the least amount of stratification and differentiation. A truly egalitarian society would ideally recognise only the biological and obvious differences of age and sex without any inequality. It was believed that the tribes that represent some of the earliest adaptations of human society, such as hunting and food gathering would also be most egalitarian. In terms of social evolution, the evolutionary schema as given by Elman Service (1962): Band, Tribe, Chiefdom, and State is largely accepted, but without any particular time frame, in contradiction to the classical evolutionists. These represent increasingly complex organisational structures, rising populations, and greater differentiation but without any consideration of anyone being superior to the other. It is recognised that smaller populations that facilitate face-to-face interactions require less control from the top and less complex authority systems. These had been called ‘acephalous’ or headless by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1970 reprint).

5.2.1 Bands

Three variables commonly inform the level of complexity of the social organisation, and these are also interrelated: namely population, subsistence pattern or livelihood, and property norms. Let us first consider the simplest form of organisation, namely the Band society. The mode of subsistence in these societies is of an acquisitive nature that is they depend largely on what is naturally available in nature. Most of the resources are in the nature of ‘free goods’, what nature has to offer to humans for their living. The Nayakas of southern India has been described by Bird-David (1999) as looking upon the forest as their parents, that give and sustain them. In other words, they do not conceptualise the forest as their property but themselves as belonging to it, as its children. This lack of a concept of property precludes the possibility of any stratification based on possession, the primary variable for stratification in what we understand as ‘class’ based societies. Thus, most hunter-food gatherers have few material possessions and therefore do not differentiate and have no hierarchy of people with more or people with less. Everyone has equal access to all life-sustaining resources and that includes men and women.

A major source of differentiation is often based as Durkheim had suggested on the division of labour in society. The tasks in society are distributed among its members and they may be placed on a hierarchy depending upon the social evaluation of these tasks. Hunting and food gathering societies, in terms of the data obtained from them, indicate that the food gathering activities of women provide the bulk of the calories in the camp, yet the hunting activities of men, that brings in occasional highprotein food, has greater prestige. Among the Oraon, Mundas, and Santals of central India, hunting is a ritual activity as well. In the absence of any property differences, patriarchy usually takes the form of a symbolic and ritual hierarchy, rather than one that translates into

any real form of domination in terms of control over resources and decision-making powers. In a band society, where all relations are face to face, of the primary group kind, most major decisions are collective in nature. A hunting food gathering way of life also requires individuals to take situational decisions, like when they go to the forest any danger may crop up and a person needs to take a quick decision. Thus, they fluctuate between a practical individualism and a collective, consensual decision-making process. Ethics and morality, necessary for the functioning of any society are enforced through the fear of supernatural sanctions. Most wrong actions are seen in the nature of sin, and not a crime, where sin is defined as a wrong against supernatural beings and crime as against fellow human beings. Forest dwellers, some consider the forest and its inhabitants as sacred and have taboos for killing or harming flora and fauna.

Shamans and ritual specialists have a higher degree of prestige than ordinary people, but often in such societies the supernatural manifests itself in the body of a person, who is regarded only as a medium, but not as having any real supernatural power, and certainly not considered sacred (Channa 2005). As long as the person is possessed, he or she will gather attention but at other times they are treated as ordinary people.

The sexual division of labour varies from one tribe to the other, but among some, there may hardly be any division, like the Malaipantaram of South India (Morris 1982). The classical division, as found in most such societies, is between men as big-game hunters and women as food gatherers; but not all environments yield big games. Some tribes may also be dependent on fishing and small game hunting like the Malaipantaram and here the egalitarian relations are most prominently seen, in fact, Morris (1982:180) reports a “pervasive emphasis on sexual egalitarianism”. Yet, the Malaipantaram are not isolated and do not depend totally on hunting food-gathering activities, and have established trade relations with the settled agricultural neighbours. They thus differ significantly from the Andamanese as reported by Radcliffe-Brown who had more elaborate rituals especially marking the puberty of boys and girls and also lived in villages or permanent encampments.

5.2.2 Tribe

The next level of the social organisation of what Service has termed as a tribal level; meaning that they are organised into kinship-based groups that function as economic and political units of society. Each of these groups is distinct but not necessarily different from each other. These are based on the principle of continuity of blood (or bone) and form closed groups based on descent from a common ancestor male or female, depending upon the nature of the descent groups, patrilineal or matrilineal. Both kinds of societies exist among the tribal populations of the world. In India, while most tribes like those of central India and the Nagas and Mizos of North East India are patrilineal, the Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya are matrilineal. The descent groups have been named in terms of the ideal structure that they may follow although in real societies various forms and named entities may exist. Ideally, three types of descent groups may exist; one which divides the tribe into two intermarrying groups, called Moities, one that is based on actually traceable descent lines, called lineage, and one that is based on putative descent from a common ancestor, known as clans. On the ground many variants may exist; for example, the Todas of Nilgiris (Walker 1998) are divided into two groups but these are endogamous in themselves, although there are many kinds of ritual relationships. Thus, they are not exactly moieties but yet there is a dual division.

Tribal social organisations have been called segmentary organisations because they can be viewed as horizontal segments rather than as vertical layers. First described in among the Nuers, detail by Evans-Pritchard (1940), this type of organisation is found in most societies that have either a pastoral or a horticultural economy. The main character of this kind of economy is that the major resource of the society, pastures and water, in the case of pastoral communities and cultivable land in the case of those practising shifting cultivation, is held in common. Sometimes, as in the case of the Bhotiyas (Channa 2013), they may be held by the entire community in common, or they may be divided among the kinship groups or lineages. Meyer Fortes (1953) had designated Unilineal descent groups as corporate lineages.

In the case of the transhumant Bhotiyas, the entire community has equal access to the high-altitude pastures near the Indo-Tibet borders, and they were given rights to graze there by the Raja of Tehri; they also have access to the streams of water that flow freely in this region. When they come down in the winter months to the lower altitude pastures near Dehradun and Hrishikesh, they have to share them with other pastoral communities like the **Tolcha and Marcha** from Niti and Mana. Such sharing of pastures over the generations has also given rise to intermarriages among them. In the communities of the upper regions of the Himalayas, there is an internal hierarchy based on the social division of labour. Some among them belong to artisan groups, like iron-smiths, carpenters and are musicians and drummers also. These groups are treated as untouchables by the upper caste of these communities that also profess caste allegiance and say that they are Rajputs. However, there are no Brahmins or other castes among them, and most such tribes, stretched along the upper regions of Uttarakhand and Himachal, including several types of Bhotiyas, have a dual hierarchy, of an upper layer of so-called Rajputs and a lower layer of untouchable artisan castes. Although most people separate tribes from castes, some incipient caste-like institutions may exist among them, although these castes are different from the rigorous pollution and purity concepts of the more traditional Hindus (see also Bailey 1961, Bose 1971 (reprint, Nathan 1997)).

Many central Indian tribes show characters similar to the unilineal type of organisation as described by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, for the African tribes. The Gonds, Mundas and Santals have lineage organisations, so have the North-eastern tribes of the Nagas. For the shifting cultivating tribes, collective ownership of land is important as in shifting cultivation, large amounts of land lie fallow and need to be protected, and such protection cannot be managed by single households. It becomes the responsibility of the entire clan that owns that land. In terms of hierarchy, the descent groups have collective ownership and they are equal to each other. The size of the descent groups needs to adjust to keep up this equality, for example, if the number of members of a group becomes more then they have to disperse so that the resources at their disposal do not diminish per unit; and if they become less, then they have to attract more members. Since in principle all members of a tribe are seen as identical, such fission and fusion of descent groups take place by marriage and adoption of members of other clans (Sahlins 1961).

Within each descent group, the land is distributed between individual households for cultivation in each cultivating season, according to need. In this way, it is ensured that each has according to need but no individual has either more or less than the other. The property concept in such societies is based largely on what has been called 'abstract property'; that is one has the right of the user but not of possession. In the lineage-

based societies, as among the Todas of Nilgiris, the elders of the lineage have authority but not real power. They have managerial roles to take care of community resources and also in some societies to negotiate marriages of the children of the lineage and to give or take bride-price. Marriage in such a society is viewed more as a relationship between two social groups than two individuals. The internal unity of the descent group is expressed in the unified identity of all members of the group, separated only by sex and age, in other words, the individual is embedded within the identity of the descent group. This identity in a practical sense implies that one member of any lineage group may be replaced by another of the same age and sex. The two important institutions that arise from this substitution are blood feuds and the marriage principles of levirate and sororate. In levirate, a dead husband may be replaced by his classificatory brother (another young man belonging to the same lineage), especially if his wife is still in childbearing age. In this way, the descent group saves on payment of another bride price and also takes maximum advantage of the fertility of the woman for whom the bride price has already been paid. In sororate, applying the same principle that bride-price has been paid for a woman, the husband's lineage feels entitled to a replacement if she dies too young. In both instances, a person is almost always substituted by a younger sibling, as he or she is a natural substitute being structurally placed next in line. In other words as social persons, one member of a lineage group is identical to another one separated only by sex and age.

The descent groups act as political units, such that individuals act towards each other as members of groups, not as unitary persons. If, for example, group A and group B are having a dispute, then all members of A will regard all members of B as the opposite party, irrespective of individual likes or dislikes. If one member of A is killed then, any other member of B can be killed in retaliation, irrespective of individual identity; this is the basis of blood feuds, and these can go on forever. Thus, personhood is in a way a collective identity and there is the least differentiation between group members.

5.2.3 The Chieftdom

This is the next form of complexity that a tribal society may take. This form of complexity is supported by some form of inequality that may exist between the various descent groups so that the elder of the descent group of higher rank may have authority over all the other lineages. There is a possibility that with enough resources as backup, the family of the chief may establish itself as a hereditary chief-ship, although it is not necessary that all chiefdoms are so. There are ways in which one individual or a lineage may establish its superiority. We do not have enough scope in this unit to discuss them all, but in most tribal societies, anyone having the superior ability is judged by not what he accomplishes for himself/herself, but what that person can do for the community and for others.

As already mentioned, dispersion rather than accumulation is the key to success, and the ability to draw followers is based on what one can offer. All social surpluses are dissipated by ritual means. If there is a chief, then the surplus is given to him in deference for his rank but to maintain his prestige, the chief needs to give away this surplus, by either giving feasts or as gifts to his followers. Elaborate ceremonies may otherwise take away the surplus. As Leach has shown in his classic study of Burma (1954), the tribe may or may not always have a chief, depending upon the individual's ability to attract and keep followers. Status in such societies is not based upon what one has but upon what one can give. In other words, the innate social mechanisms that generate

prestige also ensure that no real accumulation takes place to give rise to any actual differences in terms of power. Ownership is not encouraged. Such societies are also known as Rank societies as opposed to actual hierarchical societies. Their economy has been termed as redistributive by Karl Polyani (1957).

Such chiefdoms are usually found among shifting cultivators, where land management and protection are crucial, for example, the Nagas have the institution of Angs. Since in such type of economy, women play a key role in productive activities and bride price is given to get a bride, a hardworking man can get a surplus and get himself more wives to work in his land and then get himself more wives to generate more surplus that he can then redistribute to establish himself as a chief.

At times some descent groups or tribes as a whole manage to conquer some other tribe and then take their members as captives or slaves. In a segmentary organisation, is the absence of any concept about inequality, such captives are incorporated as members of clans and help to augment the population of the tribe. Sahlins (1961) has described how the Dinka became Nuer through conquest. If, however the slaves are used as actual slaves to generate surplus and create a real hierarchy then a chiefdom could potentially become a kingdom.

5.2.4 Kingdom

A tribal kingdom is one where the ruling family has finally found a means to establish its power in a way that it can direct surplus towards itself in the form of a real tribute. Here the ruler and his family are no longer redistributing to maintain their power but have now established some kind of ideological legitimacy to tribute offered by their followers. Often such legitimacy is evoked through a supernatural association. However, as in India, many of the tribal kingdoms, like those of the Bhils and the Gonds, were a result of the higher royalty of the land, bestowing some privileges on a particular family or tribe. Tribal kingdoms may occur within an overall feudal structure where such an ideology of centralised power pre-exists. Ecologically such a kingdom to exist requires a resource base that allows accumulation and subtraction of surplus. In his study of Burma, Leach had shown that the Shan kingdom was supported by settled wet rice cultivation in the valley while the hill Taungya (shifting cultivation on the hills) could only support a fluctuating and unstable system of power. Most tribal kingdoms are unstable and tend to dissolve easily and the tribes return to an earlier form of democracy. Usurpation of power by a few individuals usually go against tribal ethos that often tends to be egalitarian in principle. The king or person in power may be held legitimately powerful only by supernatural sanction. None of the tribal kingdoms, like in central India managed to maintain themselves or grow in size and complexity comparable to the vast monarchies of the Hindu and Muslim rulers. Their existence too was mostly dependent on the patronage of these powerful rulers.

5.3 FORMS OF LEADERSHIP AMONG TRIBES

Weber, in his classic work on power, has distinguished between three types of leadership, namely Charismatic, Traditional and Rational-Legal. The former refers to leaders who have personal charisma and can become leaders purely on their personal merit and qualities. Such kinds of leaders have always been found in various tribal societies across the world and they tend to rise in times of crises, like the famous Shaka Zulu of South Africa who was able to lead his people to victory against the mighty British Empire. In India, too several tribal leaders rose in rebellion against the

colonial forces, like Birsa Munda from Central India and Rani Gaidinliu from Manipur, a Naga woman who resisted British colonialism as well as the spread of Christianity. The Nagas also united under their charismatic leader Phizo, who has iconic status in modern Nagaland.

Such situational and charismatic leadership is a feature of most tribal societies where messiahs and even saint-like personalities tend to come up at times of stress and oppression. Among warring tribes such as the pastoral nomads of the Middle East, such leadership was the norm and persons with administrative and leadership qualities often led from the front in raids and war. Charismatic leadership may or may not be institutionalised and in most tribal societies the individuals acquire many followers during their lifetime but the movements began by them may continue or die down. We all know for example that the Naga secessionist movement began by Phizo is almost non-existent today.

Traditional leadership is ascribed and often hereditary, and is embodied in status and not in a person. The Nagas had their hereditary chiefs known as Angs and some other tribes also tend to have their Mukhiya or chief. But chiefs or hereditary rulers tend to be present only in tribes that have enough resources for stratification. In some tribes as described by Leach in his study of the Burmese highlands, chiefs can be temporary, based on their ability to attract followers. The chief has to continually replenish their resources and then redistribute them in the form of feasts and other attractions for the people to accept them as leaders. Tribal societies rarely show actual accumulation and stratification that may lead to the stage of negative reciprocity where the chief may establish his legitimacy to get tribute and have his position exalted as a leader.

Some tribes in central India like the Gonds, Mundas, and Bhils at times had rulers with real power who also had the symbolic apparatus to legitimise their traditional power, like ceremonies and paraphernalia of a palace and other riches. However tribal kings never achieved the status of other Hindu kings and often remained as small local chieftains. A tribe may have a king only when it also has a large population. The Gond Rajas of the Satpura Plateau had under them more than three million persons. According to Haimendorf, "The rulers of Chanda, situated now in Maharashtra, were until 1749 powerful princes whose domination included a large part of the Adilabad District of Andhra Pradesh. The rule of the Gond rajas of several princely states in Chattisgarh lasted until 1947 when the British withdrew from India and the Gond states merged with Madhya Pradesh" (1982:14). The Jaintias and the Khasis also had their kingdoms in the North-East, the former known as Synteng, which had a unique federal kind of organisation. As described by Dutta (1982:21), "A Khasi state was a mere federation of villages under a chief styled Syiem or Raja or Lyngdoh. There is evidence to show that at an earlier stage, the chief of such a federation was the priest or Lyngdoh. Later a separate clan was recognised as ruling clan and it was from such clans that Syiems were chosen customarily." This we find the condition of a divine legitimacy in the authority of the Khasi Syiem.

Rational-Legal power is achieved by personal merit and legitimised in a modern setup by demonstrable criteria like the passing of an examination, acquiring some prestige resources like education and money, and is supported by public acceptance. In the modern-day setup within the Indian democracy, a new set of tribal leaders have emerged who can be said to belong to this category. The Indian Administrative Service, the educational institutions, and the various tools of democracy have made available certain legitimate statuses for achieving power. Today a tribal leader is one who can win an election or pass an examination to become an IAS officer.

5.4. INSTITUTIONALISED POWER

The tribes have had their centralised institutions of power, often referred to as Tribal Councils which may have local names like the Naga Hoho or the Durbars of the Khasi Syiems. Among the Jaintias the chiefs of the many kinship-based segments of the tribe were known as Doloi. Before their contact with the British, the Doloi formed a loose federation of chiefs, of which they had twelve. Later for some reason, they formed a more cohesive group under one chief chosen from the twelve existing ones and called him Syiem. He however had only nominal and symbolic significance, probably only to unite the Jaintia, also known locally as the Synteng. Under one leadership the Jaintia had managed to conquer parts of Sylhet of the adjoining Bangladesh territory and at one time the raja of the Synteng had considerable power and extensive territories both of the plains and of the hills. The Syiems ruled with the assistance of their Durbars which were composed of administrative officers of the nature of ministers and viceroys. In the next rung were the village headmen and community elders. The Syiem could not act independently of his Durbar, which effectively meant that there was a top-down administrative system that involved many men of various ranks. As pointed out by Dutta (1982:22), “One of the chief functions of the Syiems was to act as judges with their Durbars serving as the jury”. In the modern days, the Khasi tribal councils hold considerable power and rule the state of Meghalaya, composed of the Jaintia and Khasi hills.

All the tribal areas are now under the Indian democracy and are incorporated within the central schema of Panchayati Raj. From 1992, the 73rd Amendment in the Indian Constitution made significant changes in the participation of tribes in the Indian democracy, with the formation of the statutory Gram Panchayat. While the states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, greater parts of Mizoram and North Cachar district of Assam are under **Inner Line Regulations**¹ and do not have to follow the Panchayati Raj program of the Central Governments. The other states such as Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya are under the Sixth Schedule and deemed Tribal Autonomous Regions and have Autonomous District Councils that are elected democratically. The traditional Hill councils like those in Meghalaya are still represented by the consensual leaders of the tribes, who may often be only the male elders. The Constitutional Panchayats on the other hand have provisions for representation by weaker sections and by women; which does not become applicable to those areas that are under the Inner Line provisions. The democratically elected councils may however pose a threat to the traditional power hierarchies. However tribal councils often have considerable powers and the earlier structures may prevail even under democratic conditions.

5.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, we have learned that tribe is not a homogenous category and a large range of variation exists with respect to differentiation and stratification in the tribes of India. They range from the very simple and almost perfectly egalitarian organisations of the hunting and food gathering peoples like the Malpantaram of South India and the far more complex stratified village councils and local patriarchies of the Nagas and the Gonds etc. The complexity of structures and the intensity of stratification vary according

¹ Inner Line Regulations are certain regulations introduced by colonial rulers enforcing strict travel restrictions into tribal areas to ensure that no encroachments were made into these areas. This was done to protect the rights, privileges, customs and traditions of the tribal people.

to the population density, economy, and history of a tribe. The larger, more densely populated tribes with economies that can produce enough surpluses to support an elite stratum usually show more inequality. The shifting cultivators who have communal access to property are likely to be more segmental in their authority and as we have seen some like the Jaintias, traditionally had a federation of the village chiefs.

One must also keep in mind that none of the power hierarchies and inequalities are static in nature and change over historical periods. The factors that influence such change are the influence of outsiders, changes in the economy, changes in religion, education, and in the present context, the incorporation within a democratic nation. The two-tier hierarchy of the **Bhotiyas** of Uttarakhand is for example a result of their long exposure to Tibetan society with a similar stratification. The impact of British rule led to some significant changes in tribal political structures like the emergence of centralised authority among the Jaintias.

The impact of modern value systems through urbanisation, western education, and liberalisation has also seen changes in traditional hierarchies. Thus, women may contest their traditional inferior position as among the Naga tribes, or the young may contest the authority of the elders, as among the people of the Khasi hills. One form of inequality may give rise to another as is happening with the rise of a new tribal elite based on education, occupation, and political and administrative powers within the Indian nation-state.

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Sample Questions

1. What is the difference between inequality and difference?
2. What do you understand by an egalitarian society? Is it possible to have perfect equality?
3. What is a band society? Give some examples of such societies and how they maintain order.
4. What is the role of kinship groups in segmentary societies?
5. What schema of social complexity was given by Elman service?
6. Can tribes have centralised power? If so, then under what conditions?
6. Give some examples of leadership among Indian tribes. Under what conditions did these leaders emerge?
7. What has been the impact of Indian democracy on the tribal traditional authority?
8. Who are the new elite among the tribes? How did they emerge?