

Understanding Caste, Class and Gender

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This session attempts to familiarize the participants the significance of understanding:

- Understanding social structures and institutions;
- stratification and inequality on the basis of several parameters like caste, class and gender;
- how these stratifiers mediate differential access to social and household resources and create the ground to understand issues like equity, justice and rights

Brief Notes on the Concepts[^]:

Understanding Caste

Marginalisation, exclusion and exploitation based on class, gender, race and ethnicity have been part of every society including the Indian society. But what is typical of India is the caste based exclusion and exploitation. Caste has been one of the most dominant and determining factors not only in social but also in economic and political spheres. It governs the mind set not only of the Hindus who constitute over 84 percent of Indian population but also of most of the Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists as majority of the people in these religions are basically Hindu converts. Caste is based on graded inequality. The caste system ascribes positions within the social hierarchy based on birth (ascription), thereby perpetuating intergenerationally upper, lower and out caste positions. The unequal and discriminatory social arrangements deny people of lower castes access to opportunities of educational and economic advancement, and with its strict adherence to endogamy and the notion of *purity and pollution*, it violates the rights of Dalits and their full enjoyment of Constitutional guarantees. The institution of caste perpetuates inequality, dominance and exploitation, and continues to deny opportunities of development to the lower castes (the Shudras and Ati-Shudras) who constitutes the major proportion of Hindu population.

[^] The content for these outlines has been drawn from the Foundation Course outlines of the TISS

The concept of caste is understood from diverse vantage points, and accordingly its origin and meaning, and its interpretations and justifications differ among scholars and social reformers. While some scholars justify its relevance as a divine, functional and cohesive institution, others, based on the field reality, consider it as the most harmful, coercive and divisive institution and argue for its annihilation.

The Concept of Class and Related Processes

Studies on 'social stratification' occupy a prominent place in sociology. Distribution of power, wealth and prestige in various societies has been the main concern not only of sociologists but of a variety of thinkers from other disciplines. Economic relations and 'power' have been central to the stratification but the relationships between the two may lead to conflicting social groups. Their understanding has resulted in a range of studies divided widely across ideological and philosophical grounds.

The early phase of writings on 'social class' can broadly be divided into two polarized streams: the conservative approach (in Weberian tradition) where the concept of 'social class' is treated like other major concepts: occupation, income, life styles, ownership of property, positions of influence, etc. In contrast, the radicals (in Marxian tradition) have been impressed by the conflict between the classes of owners and workers.

In the post-Industrial Western society, a few important changes are visible in their social stratification, decentralising of their relationships, especially property and production based relationships; expanding middle class with fairly uniform life styles; declining role of militant unionism; class consciousness losing its collective identity and conflict; a shift in group formation; changes in socio-political cleavages; and new forms of civil action (feminist movements, human (and civil) rights movements etc.) have lead to an increasingly problematic nature of social inequalities and conflicts.

Understanding Gender

The concepts of 'sex' (which is understood as a biological category) and 'gender' (which is a social construction) help us analyze the way societies and their structures are

gendered. Several social institutions like the family, education system, media, religion, legal system and so on contribute to the construction of gender and reinforce patriarchal values. Gender gets manifested through different kinds of controls on women – on their production, reproduction, sexuality and mobility.

Gender is embedded within other social stratifiers that mediate different outcomes for men and women. Women's position in the labor market, their health, educational opportunities and restrictions, social lives, entertainment and leisure all are implicated in the social construction of masculine and feminine sexuality. Gender inequality in sexual relations between men and women reflect and serve to maintain subordination. Sexual orientation and preference affect people economically and socially for sexuality and sexual choice become the basis for exclusion, marginalization, and violence. Women's movements question the paradigms of development; broaden conceptualizations of family, markets, public/private, politics, and violence and question the narrowness of social movements and broaden the contours of knowledge building and dissemination.