
UNIT 9 PEASANT ECONOMY*

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- describe learn about who are the peasants and what is meant by peasant economy;
- discuss the peasants in India and their structure;
- discuss the characteristics of peasants and the economical and cultural aspects of peasantry;
- outline the political economy in peasant societies; and
- discuss various stages of peasant movements in India.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit on “Domestic Mode of a Production” you learnt about modes of production in different economics including the domestic. Here in this unit you will learnt about Peasant Economy.

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Peasant societies had existed across the globe. Their primary mode of economy is agriculture. In this unit, we will discuss the general notions of peasants and peasant economy. This unit also offers an insight into the peasant societies that existed in India. It deals with the agrarian structure of peasantry in India which is categorised into three basic forms – the Maliks, the Kisans and the Mazdoors. Through this detailed overview, the unit derives the characteristics of peasant economy. It throws light on how peasantry can be both a mode of economy as well as culture. In doing this, it discusses four aspects of peasantry such as, (i) the land as a source of livelihood, (ii) family labour, (iii) capital and subsistence. With the emergence of market system, peasants were politically exploited by the external forces. To resist this exploitation, there were mass agitations throughout. The unit discusses peasant movements and categorises various peasant movements into three stages to ease our understanding of various movements of peasants in India.

9.2 PEASANTS AND PEASANT ECONOMY

Before delving into the notions of peasant economy, we will understand a key concept associated with it that is ‘who is a peasant’ and then shift our focus to ‘peasant economy’. A peasant is a person who engages in land works. In other words, a peasant can be any person who is involved in agricultural work in its various forms such as owns the land, landless labourer, a tenant, crop sharer, and so on. Many scholars from social science disciplines consider peasants as a heterogeneous group. However, there is a disparity in its understanding among other scholars who believe that a peasant is a homogenous group. There was an ambiguity in the meanings attached to peasantry by various scholars which differed from one another. A.L. Kroeber in 1948 published his work ‘*Anthropology*’ in which he made an attempt to define the term peasant. Kroeber (1948) treated peasant as a homogeneous group who share an economic relation with the market. He defined peasants as “part societies with part cultures” (Kroeber, 1948). This definition indicates that peasants attach themselves to the larger society however they retain their cultural identities, their engagement with the farm and so on, which marks their distinction from the rest.

Box 9.0

Origin of the term “Culture” derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin “colere” which means belonging to the earth and grow or cultivation and nurture. “It shares its etymology (i.e. origin) with a number of other words related to actively fostering growth” (De Rossi said, 12, July 2017) <https://www.livescience.com/2147>. Therefore, we can clearly say that the term culture emanates from agriculture.

Peasants have since very long suffered subjugation and other forms of coercion. But their socio-economic condition has led to a major transformation in a society. The 18th century peasants’ mode of production detached them from the rest in a society. During the latter centuries, there was unequal distribution of land, income and their relationship patterns with the market. This inequality prevailed strikingly among the working and non-working peasants. The former was identified as the supporters of working class while as the latter supported the capitalists. These

are the revolutionary kind of support towards the working class and the capitalist class which created class and power relations between them.

Peasant economy on the other hand implies a kind of rural economy with distinct characteristics. It comprises an array of agrarian associations where household is the basic unit of production. Household is the principal factor to ascertain the amount of production, the level of consumption and the surplus. The main source of income in household economy is agriculture where the members of a household invest their own labour. Peasant economy is adapted in such a way that it deals with a varied number of dimensions of the problems concerning peasant's livelihood such as cultural, social and physical dimensions.

9.3 INDIAN PEASANTS AND PEASANT STRUCTURE

In India, majority of people live in rural areas and their primary source of livelihood is agriculture. Peasant structure in India is based on caste, ethnicity, religion, language and so on. Thorner (1966) while studying the agrarian class structure in India and the nature of Indian agriculture used three-point formulae to distinguish between various forms of agrarian classes. The three-point formula includes the type of income received from the soil (such as rent, fruits of own cultivation and wages), the nature of rights (such as ownership and tenancy, sharing of crops or no rights) and the amount of field work done (such as not working at all, partial working, work done using family labour, work done so that others may earn wages). This criterion, according to Thorner (1966), helps in the identification of the existence of three fundamental categories of Indian agrarian classes. In India, these three categories include Maliks, Kisans and Mazdoors. Maliks are basically landlords and Thorner (1966) categorised Maliks into big and rich landlords. Kisans are the farmers who either own the land or carry out farming as tenant and there are two sub-categories of Kisans, that is, 'small landowners' and 'substantial tenants'. The third categorization of agrarian class in India includes the Mazdoors comprising three sub-categories of peasants. They are 'poor peasants', 'sharecroppers' and 'landless labourers'.

Activity 1

Read a novel or stories authored by Munshi Premchand; or Shri Lal Shukla the noted Hindi literature. You may choose a counter part in your own regional language also. Write a note of one or two pages on depiction of village in his or her writings. Share your ideas with others at your Study Center.

According to Daniel Thorner (1966), the primary source of income for landlords is their property right on the land. Maliks always lease the land on high rents to procure higher interest and they reduce the wages of the Mazdoors. Big-landlords do not engage in any kind of farming or management of the land to make it more fertilized. The other category of Maliks, as mentioned earlier, includes the proprietors possessing a large amount of land especially within their surrounding environment. These rich landlords do not engage in any farming activity. They only perform the role of supervision while the labourers cultivate the land and also look into management issues. Kisans either have traditional land rights or they can also have legal right over the right. But they are not at par with the Maliks. Among the Kisan subcategories, there are small land owners who

themselves engage in farming activities. They do not hire labourers from the outside except during the harvesting time. On the other hand, the substantial tenants have a holding on the large mass of land which is above their level of sufficiency. Also they have the assured rights on the land as tenants and these rights are quite protected. The third categorisation of Indian peasants, that is, Mazdoors make their living by working as labourers on other's land. The poor Mazdoor peasants have tenancy claims which are less secure. They possess small portions of land which suffices their daily livelihood. They do not earn much from their land than they earn from selling their labour. The sharecroppers as the second sub-category of Mazdoors carry out agricultural activities on land for the interest of others. The last sub-category of Mazdoors is the landless labourers. They sell their labour for money. They carry out all the labour activities in other's land in order to receive wages they utilize for their subsistence.

9.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF PEASANT ECONOMY

From the above discussion on peasants and peasant economy, following characteristics can be derived:

- 1) In peasant economy, the primary unit of production is family regardless of its size.
- 2) The size of family in peasant economy is determined through technical requirements and also economic requirements of a particular family.
- 3) The generally found sizes among peasants are large extended families comprising three generations at the most and a nuclear family comprising father-mother-and un-married children.
- 4) The amount of involvement required in agricultural practices depends largely on the models of inheritance.
- 5) Peasants are intensive agriculturalists who completely engage in farm work for cultivation and therefore are sedentary that is; they are placed where the land exists than non-nomadic tribes. This distinguishes them from other forms of economic societies that existed before the peasant mode of production.
- 6) Peasant societies are generally small, the members of which rely more on traditions and they resist any kind of change either in their household or in their economy.
- 7) Peasants are treated as inferior folk societies living in rural hinterlands, rather than other section of society. The reason being their isolation from urban society. This inferiority further leaves them ignorant and makes them poor. Some scholars claim that peasant poverty is the causal factor for their being dependent throughout and this dependency is inherent among peasants.
- 8) The chief characteristic of peasant economy is the division of labour based on gender and power relations among members which again is determined through gender.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Who is a peasant?

.....

2) What is the basic unit of production in a peasant society?

.....

3) Daniel Thorner has identified three fundamental categories of Indian agrarian classes. Name them.

.....

4) Peasants are generally called as pastoralists. True or False

.....

5) Peasants are a group (homogenous or heterogeneous).

9.5 PEASANTRY AS ECONOMY AND CULTURE

Peasantry or peasant economies are complex and may appear in varied forms, which are difficult to study altogether. The reason for this is that each form of peasant economy exhibits a distinct set of attributes. Some of these attributes are similar to those found in pre-peasantry societies. However, there are certain dimensions to comprehend the living patterns of peasants and their modes of economy. These dimensions include social, cultural and physical dimensions. Peasantry is mostly prevalent in rural areas and therefore their wealth and power is governed through their contact with the government. Some scholars who conducted studies on peasantry studied its various traits and laid emphasis on the significance of the modes of economy as well as socio-political condition of peasants. There are, however, others who understood peasantry as culture and economy used certain distinct factors as discussed below:

9.5.1 Farmland as the basis of livelihood

Peasant societies rely heavily on the resources available to them through their farm because of their engagement with the farm activities. Their livelihood depends on the resources obtained from the land. This reliance on the farm resources distinguishes them from landless labourers. One of the significant features of peasant economy is that the distribution of land for cultivation does not depend on the criteria set for market economy. Most of the peasant societies have traditional rights on land and these traditional rights on land are undeniable. However, there are few peasant societies where land is transferred outside of the family structure. Land in a peasant society is a source of production. There is a price to every piece of land, which secures the livelihood of peasants.

9.5.2 Family labour

One of the fundamental economic features of peasant society is its dependence on family labour, which distinguishes it from the capitalist society. Family labour is at the core of the subsistence strategy adopted by peasants. Members from each household perform in the farm lands in order to produce for their own consumption or for economic purposes. However sometimes, family labour is supplemented by the hired labour especially during harvesting time which demands higher concentration of man-power. Hired labour is especially required when the farming is done to for commercial purposes. Peasants usually utilize family labour to maintain the level of their self-consumption.

9.5.3 Accumulation of capital

The demand for and accumulation of capital is primarily an attribute found in capitalist production. However there is an ambiguity in defining capital in the form of profit for the production in peasant societies because in peasantry, the peasants perform for their livelihood rather than for commercial purposes (Ellis, 1988). There is thus a clear distinction between the profit (an attribute of capitalist society) and return back (an attribute of peasant society wherein family labour is utilized for production). Families purchase certain forms of capital for two purposes, that is, production purposes and consumption purposes. The production purposes involve ploughing the land, water pump for irrigation, or grain refinery. The consumption purposes include transportation, carriage for firewood, and so on. There is no predefined rate of return in peasantry and this is another feature that distinguishes it from capitalist society.

9.5.4 Production for subsistence/consumption

One of the striking features of peasant societies pointed out by socio-economists is their mode of subsistence. Subsistence defines the amount of production from the land and consumed by a family. They do not sell their production to generate income. As a result of this, peasants are also called by many as subsistence farmers. Their level of subsistence is the cause of their partial integration in the market economy. Globally, families working in their land are highly skilled and produce goods as commodities even for trade rather than for their own consumption, they are nonetheless termed as peasants. There is reciprocity to all the trade they carry and the transactions mostly take place among two or more households. Reciprocity is a cultural transaction characterised by the exchange of dissimilar goods or services. Also the transactions do not take place according to the market price of the goods and services which attaches cultural meaning to these transactions.

9.6 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PEASANTS

The political economy of the peasants results in their political exploitation by the external bodies, especially the larger market economic system. To resist this political exploitation or surrender to the politics of market, peasants struggle to safeguard their land than to succumb to the forces from outside. They do not enter into long term economic deals with the market or completely accept their ideologies. They instead are very considerate with their daily affairs of livelihood. The leaders in peasant societies are objective in nature and therefore they cease

to bring in some political affairs in peasant economy. Generally, the political nature of peasant societies is determined through their division into households which compose the integrated bunch of the rural peasants. Among the peasants, the landlords as well as the rich peasants occupy the highest place in the hierarchical structure and are therefore dominating than those at the bottom of this hierarchy, who are the poor landless peasants. The latter are not integrated, there is no sign of unity among them. This is because of the fact that they are governed by landlords. Those who occupy the central place in the peasant hierarchical structure have the potential to bring about a revolution in the peasant economic system and thus initiate a movement.

The idea of political economy entails the control of resources; and the control over resources results in its redistribution. Peasants' rights over the land do not signify an absolute division of land ownership. Their ownership is determined through traditional rights on the use of land but the actual ownership in legal terms may lie with them or with the entire peasant society, or the landlord. The prevalence of power relations within the peasant societies vis-a-vis political organizations highly affects the functioning of peasant economic system. Still whatever the type of ownership, there is an interdependence of land and power which means that power is derived from land and land is translated into power.

Peasants do not only suffer exploitation from land owners. There are other stakeholders also such as the mediators who play a role in the political economy of this form of production. These mediators fall between the powerful and the powerless classes and they always drift their exploitative drives towards peasants.

Activity 2

You must have read about or watched the news on the three Farm Laws passed. Also, a strong objection to these laws by a large section of farmers from all parts of India.

Write a short note of two pages about this movement unfolding in urban areas by farmers to analyse the role of peasant economy and the people associated with it. Share with others at your Study Centre.

9.7 PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Peasant movements in India can be traced from the early 19th century in East Bengal where zamindars, in order to take away the land from the farmers, began exploiting them by using force. However there was a strong resistance by farmers to their exploitation. The farmers united to resist the use of force and to safeguard their ownership rights. The enactment of the Tenant Act of 1885 was the outcome of this resistance movement by the farmers. As such, peasant movements can be understood through its three stages. The first stage (i.e. from 1857 to 1921) saw the sporadic rise of such movements during the times when peasants had no leadership. The second phase (1923 to 1946) saw that peasants were becoming class conscious and peasants collectively struggled to highlight the problems of kisans. The third phase (that is, post-independence phase) witnessed government's failure to resolve the problem of peasants. We will now discuss all these stages of peasant movements separately.

9.7.1 The first stage 1857-1921

The exploitation of kisans and the increase in the land revenue prices by the British resulted in various uprisings across the country during this stage. This stage also saw frequent incidents of famines and economic downfall which provoked the peasants to intensify their revolts. Some of the famous movements of this stage include Santhal rebellion against the British, the Deccan riots, the Bengal tenants' revolt, the Oudh insurrection, the Punjab struggle, etc. During the latter part of this stage, there were two other notable movements which erupted under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. These are Champaran movement in Bihar and Satyagraha movements of peasants in Kheda. However, prior to the rise of these two movements, the policies of the congress were directed towards protecting the interests of landlords. But these latter two movements erupted against the exorbitant rates on land revenue imposed by the British. They were not directed against the exploitation by zamindars.

9.7.2 The second stage 1923-1946

While the Congress tried to protect the interests of capitalists, the kisans realised that congress was concerned about the protection of capitalist interests. This resulted in the evolution of kisan based leadership and independent class organization so as to protect their own interests. These kisan organizations emerged across the country. In 1935, All India Kisan Sabha was established to suggest the needs and desires of peasants. This Sabha was supported by both socialist and communist parties of India. Some of the prominent movements led by Kisan Sabha to being an end to various forms of oppression that Kisans were facing include 'anti-settlement agitation of Andhra', abolition of zamindari system in Bihar', 'revolt against tyrannical forest laws in South India, and other agitations against zamindars in other states of India. These movements put a lot of pressure on the ruling party and Congress Agrarian Programme was thus formed. Despite this, Congress failed to come into compromise with the peasants to fulfil their demands due to the extremity of pressure imposed by the zamindars.

9.7.3 Post-independence stage

Even after the independence in 1947, government failed to resolve the problems of kisan peasants. However it succeeded in taking further the agrarian capitalists which instigated the kisans to intensify their struggle. The agrarian policies made after the independence offered nothing to the kisans, they instead magnified their agonies. Thus there were a series of revolts by the peasants across the country such as Indigo movement, Moplah revolt, Tebhaga movement, Telangana movement, and so on. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress led Andhra Provincial Kisan Sabha strived to halt the movement but failed because it only promoted the interests of zamindars. However the Communist party stood still to unite and promote the interests of poor kisans and labourers. But the overall welfarist measures towards the lower strata in the peasant structure were most often too less.

Check Your Progress

- 1) What are the three dimensions that help in understanding the economy and living patterns of peasants?

1. 2. 3.

2) What is the basic source of livelihood for peasants?

.....

3) What do you understand by family labour?

.....

.....

4) There are two purposes of capital purchased by peasant families. Name them.

.....

.....

5. Name four important movements that erupted in India after independence.

1. 2.

3. 4.

9.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed the general notions of peasants and their mode of economy. We also discussed the structure of peasants as they existed in India. Peasantry can be understood in term of both economy and culture. This chapter offers an insight into the aspects of peasantry that determine how peasantry can be comprehended as economy and culture. It derives the characteristics of peasant economy and discusses the political aspects of peasant economy. It also offers an insight into various peasant movements that erupted in India and which can be traced through three stages. The unit overall delves into the major aspects of peasant economy.

9.9 REFERENNCES

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9.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) A peasant is a person or a homogenous group who engage in land work especially agricultural work for their livelihood.
- 2) Household
- 3) Malik, Kisan and Mazdoor
- 4) False
- 5) Homogeneous

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Social, cultural and physical dimensions
- 2) Land
- 3) Family labour means labour in which members of a family use their energy in the production process.
- 4) The two purposes for which families purchase capital are production purposes and consumption purposes.
- 5) Indigo Movement, Moplah Movement, Tebhaga Movement and Telangana Movement.