

Social Stratification among the Kisan Claimants of Bhutni Chor, Malda, West Bengal: A Study in the Light of Structural-Functionalism

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Abstract

The structural arrangement of every society is based on the social relation and functional specification of the institutions. Social stratification is a universal phenomenon and product of differences between individuals or groups. Differences based on social, cultural and economic factors influence the structural arrangement. Theories and empirical studies submitted functional existence of stratification system. This paper is made an attempt to study the social structure of a community named Kisan, who are fighting for their social identity, residing in Malda district of West Bengal. A well stratified society has been found among the said population, which is divided into several meaningful Khoms and gottars. The hierarchical arrangement of the Khoms, regulation of marital ties between the strata and the arrangement of the gottar (unilineal kinship group) have been considered for understanding the social structure of the population group. The stratification within the society is acting as an enduring force to maintain the social structure as well as group identity.

Introduction

Radcliffe Brown (1952, 1965) observed that human beings are connected by a complex network of social relation and a particular social relation between two persons exists only as part of a wider network of social relation involving many other persons. So, the component of social structure are human beings. By social structure Evans Pritchard (1940) meant interaction between social groups, instead of individuals. Social structure refers to the arrangement of the inter-related institutions, agencies and social patterns, as well as the statuses and roles of the individuals in group. Fortes (1953) stated that 'social structure is to be regarded as the foundation of the whole social life of any continuing society'. In every society there is a structural system, which the society wishes to preserve. The structure of the society has considerable impact on the other institutions, it tends

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to mould other social and religious relations. The concept of structural functionalism is the combination of social structure and function. Linton (1962) noted that functioning of societies depends upon the presence of patterns for reciprocal behaviour between individuals. Malinowski (1945) one of the leading thinkers of functionalism, stressed on the importance of social institution for satisfying basic human needs. Malinowski's theory focussed on seven individual bio-psychological needs for satisfaction of which the social organism or culture was a vast instrumental reality (Mann, 1977). Merton (1968) opined that social functions of an organization help determine the structure and the structure ensures functions to be fulfilled by the social units. The latent function as he mentioned refers to unintended and unorganised consequences of the social order meant for adjustment or adaptation.

Both Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown viewed culture as an integrated whole. The functional view of culture focus on the importance of every custom and belief. As a structural-functionalist Radcliffe Brown attempted to see the social life of people as a whole, as a functional unity (Mann, 1977). The interaction pattern between human social groups as a driving force of social structure can be understood through stratification system.

Social stratification is basically the system of differentiating a population into some social layers. These layers are represented by some group of people who poses certain social characteristics. Each layer differs in power, status, position, possession etc. from other groups. In the words of Gisbert(1957) "Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordinates." Davis and Moore (1945) calls stratification as universal necessity which differs from society to society. They emphasised social stratification serves as an important function in any society which is necessary for society to motivate individuals to perform several complex social roles. Weber et. al. (1946) defined social stratification as the division of society into distinct groups which is based on three components viz, class, status and power. Mayer (1955) defined it as "an arrangement of positions in a graded hierarchy of socially superior or inferior ranks". Parsons (1954) viewed social stratification as unavoidable and necessary. In his words "stratification in its valuation aspect is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the standard of common value system." Social stratification is functional in the context of a social system. If we consider 'strata' to be the collectives or groups, each of them has a function to fulfil in the society.

In India, the diversified society is stratified on the basis of class, caste and gender. Caste system is further subdivided into many sub strata, in which clan or *gotra* plays a greater role. However, tribals are categorized as sub tribes, clans and so on. Srinivas and Dumont explained social stratification in India on the basis of caste system. Srinivas(1962) mentioned Caste as an institution of great complexity, having deep roots in history, basically a fivefold hierarchy. He added the real unit of this system is *jati* or sub caste in each linguistic area. He finds hierarchy is the core of the caste system. He defined caste as a hereditary, endogamous and usually localized group, having a traditional

association with an occupation, and occupying a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are determined by the rules of purity and pollution. Dumount(1970) divided the whole Indian society into a number of hereditary groups. These groups are castes which are limited to definite geographical area. He opined caste is not a form of stratification but a special form of inequality. He defined caste as a pan Indian institution, a system of ideas and values, a formal comprehensive rational system. He opined it's moreover a set of relationship of economic, political and kinship system which are mostly religious in nature. Ghurey (1969) defined caste system as a system in Hindu society which is divided into small and complete social worlds in themselves which are determined not by selection but by birth. These small worlds are marked off from one another, though subsisting within a large society. He added the idea of sub caste as well "...which were divided about two thousand smaller units- generally known as sun castes fixing the limits of marriage and effective social life and making for specific cultural tradition." He explained caste system is based on six distinctive characteristics: segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions of feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, lack of universal choice of occupation and restrictions on marriage. Madan (1970) viewed caste as a closed system. He opined caste as any of the ranked, hereditary, endogamous social groups, most often linked with-occupation that is uniquely developed in India.

The present study was done on the Kisan, a community in search of identity. The literal meaning of the term 'Kisan' is the farmer. In India there are several communities who are traditionally farmers. But there is also a Kisan Scheduled Tribe community in India as well as in West Bengal. The studied group claim themselves to be Kisan Scheduled Tribe. Due to unavailability of considerable evidence, they are yet to get such recognition in West Bengal. Therefore, they have been termed as Kisan claimants in this article. The population under study is settled in the Bhutni Chor of Malda District, West Bengal. The Kisan claimants are grouped under general caste in the studied area. They have a well elaborated social structure. The community is divided into several *Khoms* and these *Khoms* are further divided into *gottars*. This stratification produces a cognitive structure which rule over the social relationships.

The aim of the study was to explore the hierarchical stratification system found among the Kisan claimants and its structural-functional arrangement in the society.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in the first few months of 2020 among several villages of Bhutni Chor of Malda district of Indian state West Bengal. Bhutni Chor is an island on the river Ganges, situated under Manikchawk community development block. Intensive fieldwork among 54 rural villages was carried out in two phases from January to March 2020. Sampling was done in purposive mode. Focused group interview was approached for this study. Complete and-in depth data about the social structure of the mentioned community has been obtained. The data was analysed as per researchers' impression. The informants of the study include leaders of the community as well as normal inhabitants of these selected villagers.

Studied Population

As the name suggests, the Kisans are agriculturist by profession. As per Census 2011, the total population of Kisan in Malda district was 92,598. This population probably includes the claimant Kisan also. Kisan claimants are mainly residing at Bhutni Chor of Malda district. They have traced their origin in Tin Pahari area, which is in Rajmahal hills covering part of West Bengal and Jharkhand states. They move on to the North West and entered Shahibganj and Purnia district of Bihar. The studied population have their own agricultural land while some work as agricultural labour or other kind of labours. They consider their mother tongue as Kisani. They are conversant with a mixture of regional languages such as Bengali, Oriya and Hindi. They do speak a language close to the language of their present inhabiting areas.

There are different views regarding the identity of the Kisan community. According to Dalton (1872) the name Kisan, is believed to be acquired by the tribes due to their innovation in agriculture. He described Nagesia, Nageswar, Kisan as small Dravidian tribe of Chotanagpur. They have two sub groups; one uses vermilion in their marriage ceremony (*Sindhuriya Kisan*) while others substitute oil (*Teliya Kisan*) in marriage. Risley (1891) mentioned that Kisan is synonymous to Nageswar and Oraon Tribes. The Kisan Scheduled Tribe is present in several Indian states namely Odisha, Jharkand, Bihar, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh. But the studied population is not recognised as the Scheduled Tribes. They claim themselves to be Hindus. Lord Shiva is the supreme deity of the community.

Analysis

The social structure of the Kisan (claimant) society has been analysed through three aspects; 1. The hierarchical arrangement, 2. The pattern of marriage, 3. The system of *gottar* (unilineal kinship group).

Different opinions regarding the hierarchical arrangement of the *Khoms* have been found in the studied villages, which are generalised into two segments and presented through the tables and charts.

Findings

Social Structure of the Kisan Community

The stratification system found among the Kisan claimants of Bhutni Chor is unique. They have a well stratified patrilineal society which is divided into *Khoms* and *gottars*. This system moulds the relationship between each stratum.

Structural Arrangement of *Khoms*

Many scholars believed that social structure is about the relationship between groups. *Khoms* are sub groups of the Kisan (claimant) society. It means *goshti* or section. It is the major social group among the Kisans based on their descent. People belonging to

the same *Khom* believe in a common ancestor, but the genealogical links are difficult to trace accurately as the group is very large. *Khoms* are normally endogamous in nature. Marriage outside the *Khomis* not preferred. However, some rules have been established to accept inter group marriages. Each section has specific occupational specialization and hence the groups are functional. The groups could be identified with land holding pattern and occupational specialization. There is essence of superiority or inferiority among these sections. In past people from superior *Khoms* used to reserve all the important posts like religious specialists, village headman or member of elder's council. Individuals belonging to lower *Khoms* had to abide by the higher *Khoms*.

The community is divided into four major *Khoms*. Two different opinions have been found regarding the hierarchical arrangement of the *Khoms*. In one opinion (of folklore) the *Khoms* are – *Saresat ghoriya*, *Chak-boila*, *Chuna-koila* and *Dosaua*. The *Saresat ghoriya* has the highest status. Their land holdings are distinctly larger than other sub-sections. They employed labourers to their agricultural field and occupied all the posts of village organizations. *Chak-boila* is next in status within the Kisan (claimant). They are identified by the occupation of singing in marriage ceremonies of the Kisans. They also have agricultural lands, but the sizes are less than *Saresat ghoriyas*. The *Chuna-koila* usually has meagre landholdings, as a result professionally they had to work as agricultural labourers in other's land, especially those of *Saresat ghoriyas*. Their name *Chuna koila* suggests people whose life is full of hardships and their life has become *koila* means coal. *Dosaua* has the lowest social status within the Kisan and provide manual services to others specially those of the highest *Khoms*. They mostly worked as maid free of cost in *Saresat ghoriyas* houses in return they were provided food. In earlier times, they had the concept of pure and impure, in which the three sections i.e., *Saresat ghoriya*, *Chak-boila*, *Chuna-koila* were touchable. Despite being lower in status *Chuna koila* was treated as touchable as they were employed as agricultural labour. *Dosaua* was treated as untouchables. These people faced several humiliations; they could not enter inner house of other sections of the population. People of other sections used to purify their belonging with cow dung water if things were touched by these people.



Figure 1.1 : Diagram Showing *Khom* Hierarchy (in First Opinion)

Another strand in folklore records that the *Khoms* are- *Satghoriya*, *Dosala*, *Bahisi* and *Tehisi*. *Satghoriya* stands at the top of the hierarchy in respect of boooth social and economic status with ownership of larger parcels of agricultural land. The next in hierarchy were the *Dosala* who were also economically strong with ownership of agricultural land but their land sizes were smaller than that owned by the *Satghoriya*. These two groups were considered superior among the *Khoms*, people from other groups in the community provided their services to these two groups. The lower two groups were hierarchially situated in order of *Bahisi* and *Tehisi*. *The Tehisis* were the last privileged with little or no possession of wealth and assets and both these two lower groups were occupationally agricultural labourers who worked in farmlands of the other two superior groups of the *Khom*.



Figure 1.2 : Diagram showing *Khom* hierarchy (in second opinion)

A third interpretation and narrative on the community emphasizes that there were many *Khoms* with *Saresatghoriya/Satghoriya* at the top of the hierarchy in terms of social position and land ownership. This group often compared themselves with higher caste Hindus. The *Pathans* were the next in hierarchy with ownership of land holdings and were held in esteem for their valour and courage. The *Dosala* were the next in social hierarchy with position of land holding and specializing in agricultural activities. The *Bahisi* were next in order and had less endowed with land and other wealth assets and a majority of them were agricultural labourers by occupation. The *Chak-boila*, almost having no land were in the lowest rung of the social order and were mostly manual labour who rendered services in the farmlands and houses of the *Saresatghoriyas*.

Although the accounts on social and economic hierarchial order of the *Khom* community have three different strands of narratives as per the folkoric tradition and social accounts, it nevertheless exhibits a similar trend of social classification where the *Saresatghoriyas* and *Dosalas* are found to enjoy a higher social and economic status.



Figure 1.3 : Daigram Showing *Khom* hierarchy (in Third Opinion)

The *Khom* hierarchy and social ordering is based on economic endowment mostly possession and ownership of land. Kisan being the agricultural community depend on land. The social status of a group depends on possession of land. Land owners have the power to control others. Distribution of economic responsibility within the Kisan society runs the whole system.

Marriage Alliance Between *Khoms*

Marriage as a social institution forms the basis for various social and economic relations and influences the process of social transformation. Cultural practices and social beliefs help guide various rituals and practices in respect of marriage and social functions. The institution of marriage and various rituals and practices prevalent among the *Khoms* community is one of the important cultural aspect that have helped in continuing the social fabric and organic structure of the society.

Khoms are traditionally endogamous. But in some special cases marriages are allowed within two *Khoms*. Some restrictions were found to exit among the sample group of *Khoms* under present study. When a superior *Khom* man marries a woman from lower strata of the community, it is believed that their ritual purity remains undisturbed but the children are considered of lower status than their father. It is upheld that in such a marriage, the bride and her family enjoys an upward vertical social mobility, and this kind of marriages are socially approved. In cases where a man from lower strata of the *Khom* community marries a *Khom* woman from higher social hierarchy of the community, the marriage is known as *namo*. Socially these marriages are construed as 'impure' where the bride and her family is considered to go down in social hierarchy as the daughter is given away in marriage to a boy of lower social strata in the community.

Both bride price and dowry practice is prevalent among Kisan society. The families from lower strata of *Khom* society have to give dowry (*pun*) to families from higher social hierarchy during marriage, irrespective of the fact whether they belong to groom's side or bride's side. In other words, dowry practices are in consonance with economic

position and not as seen in other communities where bride’s family pay dowry to groom’s family. Thus, if a man from higher social strata in *Khom* community marries a woman from lower strata in *Khom*, then groom’s parents are compensated with a payment, mostly money or other movable assets e.g. a bicycle or a motorcycle, and the payment is called *pun*. Likewise, if a man from lower strata of *Khom* community marries a woman from upper strata of *Khom* community, then bride’s parents receive the payment. This kind of payment is higher in denomination and value compared to the payment of *pun*, where groom’s family usually gift clothes, cash, agricultural implements and food items. However, the groom’s parents have to pay bride price to bride’s family for marriages between same *Khom*. However, the traditional practice of paying bride price has changed over time and in lieu dowry payment by brides family is reportedly practised among the *Khom* community much in congruence with similar practice of dowry reported among other communities across India. Like the hierarchical system there are two opinions regarding marriage alliance between the *Khoms*.

Table 1.1: Preferred Forms of Marriages Between *Khoms* as per One Tradition

| Khom | Man allowed to select mates from | Woman allowed to select mates from |
|----------------|---|---|
| Saresatghoriya | Saresatghoriya | Saresatghoriya |
| | Chak boila | |
| | Chuna koila | |
| | Dosaua | |
| Chak boila | Chak boila | Saresatghoriya |
| | Chuna koila | Chak boila |
| | Dosaua | |
| Chuna koila | Chuna koila | Saresatghoriya |
| | Dosaua | Chak boila Chuna koila |
| Dosaua | Dosaua | Saresatghoriya |
| | | Chak boila |
| | | Chuna koila |
| | | Dosaua |

In both the cases upward movement of the women through hypergamy is accepted among the studied population, but hypogamy is not accepted. This kind of marital regulation is adhered so as to continue the traditional structural arrangement of the society.

Table 1.2: Preferred Forms of Marriages Between *Khoms* as Per Alternative Tradition

| Khom | Man allowed to select mates from | Woman allowed to select mates from |
|-------------|---|---|
| Satghoriya | Satghoriya | Satghoriya |
| | Dosala | |
| | Bahishi | |
| | Tehishi | |
| Dosala | Dosala | Satghoriya |
| | Bahishi | Dosala |
| | Tehishi | |
| Bahishi | Bahishi | Satghoriya |
| | Tehishi | Dosala |
| Tehishi | Tehishi | Bahishi |
| | | Satghoriya |
| | | Dosala |
| | | Tehishi |

Structural Arrangement of *Gottar*

Radcliffe Brown gave importance to dyadic relationship in social structure. The kinship patterns are guided by the principle of dyadic relation. *Gottar* (clan) is a unilineal kinship group among the studied Kisan claimants. *Gottar* is associated with a mythical ancestor, found among the Hindu caste population. These *gottars* are exogamous in nature, marriage partners essentially come from two different *gottar*. However, marriage within same *gottar* is solemnized, but in such a case *praeshchito* (atonement) has to be performed.

The following clans were found among the studied population: *Mugrishi*, *Agnishi*, *Aladoshi*, *Irish-pirishh*, *Bagrishi*, *Talwar*, *Kangsarishi* and *Dandoshi*. *Mugra* is an important agricultural implement among them and people of *Mugrishi* clan are believed to have originated from *Mugra*. *Agni* means fire in Sanskrit- people belonging to *Agnishi* *gottar* are believed to have originated from fire. *Alo* means light- people who are believed to have originated from light are known as *Aladoshi*. People of *Irish-pirishh* clan are believed to have originated from *rish*. *Rish* is an important part of agricultural implement plough. *Bagrishi* clan is believed to have originated from *bag* meaning tiger. People belonging from *Talwar* clan are assumed to have originated from stick. *Kangsa* is related to Hindu mythology, he is maternal uncle of Lord Krishna. *Kangsarishi* clan is said to have originated from Lord Krishna. Members of each *gottar* respect and worship their ancestor, whether it is an instrument or animal or an individual. Since men and women of same *gottar* consider each other as brothers and sisters, marriage within same *gottar* is considered as a sin and social arrangement of *gottar* is presumed to be performing a latent function of maintaining the social order.

Discussion and Conclusion

Structural-functionalists theory is mainly about maintaining a social order. The structure of society is based on social interaction between individuals and groups. Groups are made up of functional units, maintained through social institutions, guided by the culture to serve interrelated social actions. How the societies maintain the social systems vary accordingly. Social stratification in India is mainly based on caste system. Castes are endogamous occupational groups and a part of hierarchical social arrangement. The present study was based on the stratification system present among the Kisan claimant of Bhutnichor in Malda district (West Bengal). The studied Kisan community is neither regarded as Scheduled Caste nor as Scheduled Tribe in West Bengal. They are traditionally farmers and their society is divided on the basis of attachment with agriculture and specifically land holding pattern. The studied population is divided into *Khoms* and *gottars*. *Khoms* are grouped in four or seven strata (as per different traditions folklore), associated with different occupation, land holding and having particular status and roles. The *Khoms* in higher social strata tend to be associated with more landholdings while *Khoms* from lower strata have lower size classes of landholdings. Hence, in this society, the social status or hierarchical social order is directly proportionate to the ownership and possession of agricultural land sizes. The more agricultural land one group has the more prestige or higher status it is alluded with. Similarly, the less farmland one group has, lower social status is accredited to them in their community. Occupation is basis of organic relation and the primary indicator of social structure together with wealth and asset ownership especially land holdings among the Kisan claimants. This tends to influence the entire social system of the community. The concept of pure and impure is also associated with the *Khoms*. The hierarchical arrangement of the society exists since long. With relaxations in the orthodox nature of hierarchical arrangement, the social order is maintained through marriage rules and ensures the functionalist of the hierarchial arrangement. Practice of hypergamy and restriction of hypogamy of the women is the main functional approach for maintaining the social order. The unilineal kinship group *gottar* or clans also mould the relationships in this society. There are eight exogamous *gottars* in this community with their different stories of origin. Although there is no concept of superiority or inferiority between the *gottars*, but these are important social unit for maintaining an enduring social relationship.

The structure of studied Kisan society is dependent on the hierarchical system. Individual members of this stratified system are aware of their position; status and role. The *Khoms* are not only providing economic support, but are also performing the social function of maintating the social order of the community. However, like every social system, this hierarchical arrangement too is not static. There are visible postive changes where traditional notion and practice of untouchability is found to be on the wane in Kisan (claimant) society. The orthodox nature of *Khom* endogamy and preference of hypergamy of women have also undergone changes as newer contacts and social interactions developed with forces external to the society. Expansion and access to education has brought in new changes where the younger generation are moving

out for alternative livelihoods in lieu of choosing farming as a profession. All societies have evolved with time and have undergone changes as newer concepts percolated with spread of education and possibilities of newer social arrangements with alternative occupations and it is within this flux that the structure of this stratified society continues to evolve and exist in a modified form and function with its newer forms of structural order.

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