

Equity and Gender 1: Understanding Class, caste and gender

Marginalisation, exclusion and exploitation based on class, caste ethnicity and gender characterises much of the South Asian region. Discrimination based on these becomes the basis for resource access and thereby survival. Before we get on to understanding the manifestations of inequity and discrimination in the water sector, we need to look at and understand these forms of discrimination as they are seen in our societies. Solutions for bringing in water equity cannot be sought without an understanding of these realities.

There is a dynamic interconnection between class, caste and gender and this need to be understood in the current context. Often each of these categories is understood in isolation and the relationship between the three is rarely seen or understood.

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 Marxian writings class is a political economy category referring to a social group embodying certain relations of production. As a social group it is located in a mode of production. The ruling class or classes are the owners of the means of production. By means of production we mean resources that range from land, water, property factories, technology or knowledge. The means of production are owned by a ruling class/classes and the ruled are those who are engaged in labour for these classes and are subject to exploitation by them. Thus class is not simply an economic category or an income group but it symbolises power relations and production relations.

Class structure has been changing across times and it differs according to contexts. From the feudal societies to capitalists one, class has been changing and in its wake bringing about new kinds of social and production relations. Class legitimises itself through welfarism and cultural hegemony. It is important to understand how class has continued through the periods of feudalism well into capitalism in new and different ways.

In post colonial societies of south Asia the process of class formation is not the same as in other modern European societies as colonialism did not eliminate feudalism as it brought along capitalism. In some of the south Asian countries this was interconnected with caste and presented itself quite differently. These experiences also showed how a reading of class

alone is incomplete without a reading of caste, ethnicity, tribe and patriarchy in the South Asian context.

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 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 and Nepal for instance 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. According to B R Ambedkar, "caste is a system of graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt". The caste system ascribes positions within the social hierarchy based on birth (ascription), thereby perpetuating inter-generationally upper, lower and out caste positions. The unequal and discriminatory social arrangements deny people of lower castes access to means of production, opportunities of educational and economic advancement. Caste perpetuates itself through its adherence to endogamy and the notion of *purity and pollution* thereby making it a situation of *fait accompli*. The distinguishing feature of the caste system is that those who own the means of production also own the means of symbolic production in order to perpetuate the system. 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 by presenting it as a system of consensual values i.e. a set of values acceptable to both dominant and the dominated, others underscores its religio-cultural framework while some others see how it closely works with class

Understanding Gender

Gender pervades our lives in every possible way. It is manifested in how we act, behave, what clothes we wear and the norms and values that we emulate. 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 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. Gender intersects class and caste as well as ethnicity and tribe in significant ways. In understanding gender we need to see its relation with each of these since they shape each other.