

# **SOCIOLOGY OF INDIA-I**

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**Indira Gandhi National Open University**

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## **COURSE INTRODUCTION**

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The course Sociology of India-1 is one of the core courses of B.A (Honours) Sociology. The attempt in this course is to explain to you the sociology of Indian society, its social institutions and social processes. The question arises, why do we study social institutions and processes? Further, in what way it will help us to understand Indian society? Although we observe and experience these institutions in our everyday life through common sense observations, sociology provides us a scientific way to make sense out of common sense observations and practices. Through sociological insights, we attempt to understand the different social institutions of Indian society with a critical intent. We will make use of, available interpretations through different discourses to engage with understanding of institutions of Indian social structures and traditions to map the processes of change in these institutions.



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**Block 1**

**Understanding India: Major Discourses**

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## **BLOCK 1 INTRODUCTION**

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In the first block of this course, **Understanding India: Major Discourses**, we have discussed various strands of ideas that will inform you about Indian society and its institutions. These strands vary from the archaeological, historical documents and records used by the Orientalists and the Indologists, both before and after colonialism to the present. Besides, these major discourses, the nationalist re-construction and finally, a subaltern critique of Indian society and social institutions have been explored in this course. These discourses will help you to understand the ways Indian social institutions have been addressed and a critique of the same has been developed.



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# UNIT 1 INDOLOGICAL DISCOURSE\*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Meaning of Indology
- 1.3 Indological Perspectives
  - 1.3.1 Influence of Indological Perspective
  - 1.3.2 Critique of Indological Perspective
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 References
- 1.6 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the meaning of Indology;
- describe the discourse on different perspectives of Indologists on Indian society between third century B.C to early 19<sup>th</sup> century; and finally;
- provide critique of the Indological perspective.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we will explain to you the meaning of Indology, what it is and how it is a part of the orientalist discourse. As a student of sociology of India it is important to make you familiar with the contributions of scholars known as Indogists who studied society in India based on the accounts of the Sanskrit, Persian etc. texts, documents, observations recorded by different travelers to India from third century BC to early 19<sup>th</sup> century. You will learn about their different perspectives on Indian society and finally; the critique of these perspectives have been described in this unit.

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## 1.2 MEANING OF INDOLOGY

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There have been recorded observations on Indian society since the Third Century BC written by foreign travelers who included Romans, Byzantine Greeks, Jews, Chinese, and from 1000 AD onwards, Arabs, Turks, Afghans and Persians.

A Greek historian Megasthenes, visited India in 302 BC as the ambassador of Seleucus I Nicator, founder of the Seleucid Empire, to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka's grandfather. According to Megasthenes, the people of the Magadha kingdom, with its capital Pâmaliputra (Patna), were divided into seven groups:

- 1) Philosophers who performed rites and sacrifices.
- 2) Farmers who formed bulk of the population and paid taxes.

- 3) Shepherds and hunters.
- 4) Artisans.
- 5) Soldiers.
- 6) Overseers/Inspectors of administrative tasks appointed by king or magistrates.
- 7) Councilors and assessors officials in the Kings administration.

Megasthenes' account of India in his book **Indika** was based on direct observation, he did not know any local language thus, his writings could be seen as not very clear. He observed urban political centers but he does not mention caste system.

Al-Baruni (973 ca-1030) appears to have been familiar with Sanskrit sources and mentions four varna theory of caste system, Mughal records recognise internal sub diversions within caste system.

### Box 1.0

In 1443, Abdur Razzak Samarqandi was on an important mission to open diplomatic relations between the Timurid Empire and what was then the most powerful city-state in India. Vijayanagara, the great Hindu City of Victory, was then approaching the peak of its power, and controlled almost all the rich lands of peninsula India to the south of the river Tunghabadra.

‘The city of Vijayanagara simply has no equal in the world,’ he wrote. ‘It is such that the pupil of the eye has never seen a place like it, and the ear of intelligence has never been informed that there existed anything to equal it in the whole world... It is a city of enormous magnitude and population, with a king of perfect rule and hegemony, whose kingdom stretches more than a thousand leagues. Most of his regions are flourishing, and he possesses three hundred ports. He has a thousand elephants with bodies like mountains and miens like demons.... The Empire contains so great a population that it would be impossible to give an idea of it...’

Abdur Razzak was particularly astonished at the extraordinary personal wealth visible everywhere — especially the profusion of jewellery worn by men and women of every social class, and the sophistication of the jewellers who dealt in gems: stalls selling pearls, rubies, emeralds and diamonds were, he says, doing strong business, drawing in traders from across the globe. He passed through seven concentric rings of fortifications, each with its own citadel, with walls, he wrote, made of ‘stones the height of a man, one half of which is sunk in the ground while the other rises above it’. He then found himself in a belt of beautiful gardens whose orchards were bubbling with runnels of clear water and ‘canals formed of chiseled stone, polished and smooth’.

Portuguese natural philosopher Garcia da Orto (1501-68) it was in Vijayanagara that the world's biggest diamonds were on display — and the richest diamond deposits were located nearby, within its territories: ‘there are two or three rocks which yield much to the King of Vijayanagara,’ he wrote, ‘The diamonds yield great income to the King of this country. Any



stone which has a weight over 30 carats belongs to the King. For this guard is placed over the diggers, and if any person is found with any, he is taken with all that he has.... The Gujeratis buy them and take them for sale in the city of Vijayanagara, where these diamonds fetch a high price, especially those they call naifes, being those which nature has worked; while the Portuguese value those most which have been polished. The Canarese say that just as a virgin is more valuable than a woman who is not one, so this naife diamond is worth more than a cut one.... The largest I have seen in this land was 140 carats, another 120, and I have heard that a native of this land had one of 250 carats... Many years ago I heard from a person worthy of credit that he saw one in Vijayanagara the size of a small hen's egg.'

Greatest Empires of southern history: the Pallavas, the Chalukyas and the mighty Cholas of Tanjore.

William Dalrymple, Foreword in Hampi: Of Gods and Kings by George Michell and John Fritz

*Sourced* from: <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/essay/the-untold-history-of-hampi>

In India's historical journey colonialism is an important turning point which introduced India to modernity. European travelers had been visiting India since long and their accounts talked about Indian society in glowing terms. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century India, there was settled agriculture and large variety of craft production, institution of kingship, partially written legal system, record keeping and taxation based on regular assessment and major military force. Political and economic professions similar to European society also existed, like clerks, tax officials, bankers, judges, traders, etc. A complex socio-religious system was practiced based on sacred texts amongst both Hindu and Muslim communities with a range and hierarchy of priests and scholars of religion.

### Activity 1

Read translations of classical Sanskrit texts such as 'Shakuntalam' and write a page on India during this time and discuss with other students at your study center.

## 1.3 INDOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Indological view provided some concepts, theories and framework that the scholars claimed to have emerged from their study of Indian civilisation. They primarily adopted a historical and comparative approach. Their understanding of Indian society and its structure is largely based on their study of classical Sanskritic and Persian texts and literature. William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke also held a deep respect for ancient cultures, both of India and the West and were more interested in understanding the continuity across civilisations.

However, we cannot say that the interest in India and Indian society is only recent. Cohn (1990) notes that from the scattered account of foreign travelers from third century BC to that of the historians in the courts of Indian rulers till about 15<sup>th</sup> century we find range of writings based on both first hand observations of Indian society and secondary analysis of the Sanskrit texts.

It is only that the Indologists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and onwards gave a more systematic account. We must also note that while an account of these earlier writings help us to know how the political, economic and social systems differed from the later era and what the similarities are, i.e. the broad categories by which we understand India today, all of them cannot strictly be categorised as an Indological perspective from methodological point of view.

Thus, the ideological construction of India can be found in the accounts of travelers like Megasthenes (mentioned above), of historians like Al-Biruni and later Abul Fazl Allami, the early Colonialists, i.e. the Portuguese adventurers and administrators, the merchants and the missionaries who continued to write about India till the advent of the British rule.

While there are rich descriptions of the prevailing culture of that time, they are either based on partial observations of the happenings in urban centres or thinly operational definitions of the social system. So, for example, Megasthenes, because of his inability to understand native languages makes no reference to Varna theory.

Instead his understanding is that of a class based society divided more around occupations. On the other hand, Al Biruni and Abul Fazl through their familiarity with Sanskritic sources arrive at the Varna theory of the caste system and even recognised the internal divisions of caste. The very fact that there is reference to caste groups as kin-based social categories reflect that both the textual understanding of the Varna system co-existed with the practical operational understanding of the caste groups. Moreover, while the European accounts shows fascination about the matrilineal and polyandrous groups, the significance of untouchability and commensality taboos etc., most of them tend to focus on Mughal courts and on political and commercial matters rather than on Indian society, the people and culture. Dutch accounts of Hinduism were published in 1670 and that of a French merchant and traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier between 1631-1667, with brief reference to the caste system. It is not until much later, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that we find more comprehensive narratives about the society and culture.



**Fig. 1.1: Portrait of a Dutchman by a local artist. Udaipur, Mewar, c1771-12 at British Museum**

The School of Indology reminds us that India is 'one', in a way where we find the presence of a traditional, Sanskritic and higher civilisation that demonstrates its unity. However, its folly lies in assuming that India has a homogenous population thereby refusing to accept the lower or popular level of the civilisation.

This 'unity' of India that Indologists talk about does not require that local, regional and social diversities be confused or complicated. Instead they reinforce the claim of unity. In reality the conflict is more of a method since unlike in other parts of the world like Africa there is not merely a cultural unity, a more obvious form. In case of India, the unity lies in ideas and values and therefore goes deeper and is less definable (Dumont and Pocock: 1957).

As Dumont and Pocock (ibid) argue, while it may appear that classical indology which works in a historical perspective is too divorced from sociology's actual temporal methods the sociologist must familiarise himself with not merely the living language but with classical literature (Indology). For them a sociological study of India lies at the union of Sociology and Indology. Scholars like Bougle, Dumezil, Marcel Mauss, A.M. Hocart, among others not only wrote extensively on Indo-European comparison but balance each other in terms of a historical and sociological analysis. For example, Prof. Dumezill's more historical analysis of Varna complements Hocart's work on caste, largely based on direct observation.

Some basic assumptions of the Indologists:

- India had a glorious past and to understand it one must go back to the sacred books that were written during the ancient times. Both the philosophical and the cultural traditions of India are rooted in these texts.
- These ancient books reveal the real ideas of the Indian culture and society. One must understand these books to chart out the future development of India.
- Institutions should be set up to encourage the study of ancient Indian texts and teach Sanskrit and Persian literature and poetry.

### Box 1.1

William Jones, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Nathaniel Halhed set up the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1787 and started a journal called Asiatics Research. The journal was devoted to anthropological and Indological interests such as study of Sanskrit, comparative jurisprudence, comparative religion etc. The members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal were the first European scholars to recognize the common ancestry of Sanskrit with Greek, Latin and other European languages.

William Jones's efforts not only substantially added to the store of human knowledge; his work also generated a renewed interest among the Indian people about their own rich national and literary heritage. In 1789 he completed his translation of Shakuntala, Sanskrit plays write by Kar Kahil as famous drama, and the Hitopadesa, a collection of fables.

## Check Your Progress I

1) What is Indology?

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2) How has Indology contributed to sociology in India?

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### 1.3.1 Influence of Indological Perspective

In the post Plassey period (1757 onwards) we find growing knowledge of Persian, Sanskrit and vernacular texts that enabled a comprehensive analysis of the society and culture of India. The depth and range of India's history, philosophy and religion came to be known through the translations that were now being attempted by early scholars. Alexander Dow, the first to translate the Persian history of India and arriving at the understanding of Hinduism also realised the limitations of not referring to the original texts of Hinduism written in Sanskrit. Interestingly enough, in the process of giving importance to the text as the only source of knowledge about Indian society and culture, little attention was paid on the experienced reality.

The Indologists exaggerated the spirituality of Indian civilisation and hardly made any effort to study the material culture. Hence, they arrived at a more romanticised definition of Hinduism that had several implications.

- i) Firstly, it overemphasised the centrality of the Brahmins and their dominant status in Indian society even in the face of contrary evidence that showed few Brahmin dynasties and political and military power in the hands of other groups as well.
- ii) Second, it led to a fixed view of Indian society with no regional variation let alone historical changes over time. What followed is an unquestionable acceptance of authority of texts and prescriptive behaviour rather than the actual behaviour and customs being practiced by the people. Hence Indian society came to be understood as a system of rules and social order that refutes social change.

As Edward Said (1979) and Bernard Cohn (1990) both pointed out, the knowledge became 'fixed' with categories of caste, race, tribe, ritual, custom, law, political institutions, occupations having a 'timeless essence' especially texts of Hinduism written in Sanskrit. Interestingly enough, in the process of giving importance to the text as the only source of knowledge about Indian society and culture, little attention was paid on the actual lived-reality of people in the society.

Even within sociology many of the founding fathers of Indian Sociology were also influenced by Indology, like B.N. Seal, S.V. Ketkar, B.K. Sarkar, G.S. Ghurye and Louis Dumont among others. The Indological writings dealing with the Indian philosophy, art, and culture are reflected in the works of Indian scholars like A.K. Coomarswamy, Radhakamal Mukerjee, D.P. Mukerji, G.S. Ghurye, Louis Dumont and others. Ghurye, although a trained anthropologist under W.H.R. Rivers, turned routinely to classical texts for understanding all manners of contemporary phenomena – costume, architecture, sexuality, urbanism, family and kinship, Indian tribal cultures, the caste system, ritual and religion. His colleagues and students like Irawati Karve and K.M. Kapadia also continued to do so. Ghurye’s method has often been later referred to as indigenous Indology, more influenced by the writings of Indologists of Bhandarkar Institute of Bombay rather than the British writings established by Sir William Jones or Max Muller.

In the process, he fails to see the rise of modern India and the contribution of Islamic and British rulers, instead sees India as the product of the-Vedic period. Dumont’s Indological bias is more apparent in his thesis about Varna and caste where he assumes unity of Indian civilization. The work, *Homo Hierarchicus* is based on the fixed view of Varna theory as an all-encompassing category and therefore Indian society as being essentially based on the axis of hierarchy as against European society based on the axis of equality. He further assumed that the structure of caste is the result of the ideology of purity and pollution a fixed and unified set of ideas and values. Louis Dumont imagined a modern Western society that – unlike India – aspires to rationality and was essentially individualist compared to the collectivist or holistic India (Dumont 1972). Hence in many ways he followed the Indologists by going back to the idea of a European-Indian divide, the West and the East as typically opposite.

The studies conducted during the period of the late 1970s cover a wide range of subjects, such as social structure and relationships, cultural values, kinship, ideology, cultural transactions and symbolism of life and the world etc., mark a noticeable influence of the Indological method but based on textual materials either drawn from epics, legends, myths, or from the folk traditions and other symbolic forms of culture, transactions and symbolism of life and the world etc.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) Who are the main contributors of the Indological school?

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### 1.3.2 Critique of Indological Perspective

Orientalism or study of the East is treated by Edward Said and Ronald Inden mainly as a problem of cultural dominance cradled within history or a space marked by power equations. Scholars like Himani Bannerji also points out that the work of Jones and other Indologists were mainly directed to establish an ideological mastery over India and rationalize the colonial rule.



In her essay on Jones, Bannerji (1994) remarks :

*“Even though Jones is mainly a humanist -a translator, linguist and a cultural essayist -an examination of his method and content of knowledge regarding India discloses an epistemology for a specific social ontology of power... Jones’ purpose is to re-present India, that is to create a stock of knowledge about its history, culture and society with an aim to stabilizing these representations... The outgrowth of this discovery of ‘India,’ culminating into a sort of mythology, provides the interpretive and interpellative framework for the orientalization of India, or what Inden calls the “symbolic cultural constitution” of the indological construct” (1994:19).*

Bannerji further cites Niranjana (1990 in 1994:20) to comment on the significant features of Jones work as a jurist and a translator that reflect an attempt to rationalize colonial rule.

Firstly, by emphasising the need for translation by the Europeans, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and cultures; and

Second the desire to be a law-giver, to give the Indians their “own” laws; and

Lastly therefore the desire to “purify” Indian culture and speak on its behalf.

Sociologist A.R. Desai critiques that viewing Indian society from the lens of culture and providing a textual view is far removed from the real India with its inequalities, diversities, dialectics and exploitations.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) What are the main criticisms against the Indological school?

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## 1.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have discussed the meaning of Indology. Indology is a part of the Orientalist approach towards the study of Indian Society. It refers to the study of Indian (South Asian) society, its culture, languages, literature, history and politics. The effect of the Indological approach is that it not only concretised the idea of India by giving a textual view but also established it as a scholarly pursuit that later influenced researchers, thinkers and the field of sociology of India. Bernard S. Cohn (1990) has analysed Orientalists’ perspective to explain this textual view that offered the picture of Indian society as being fixed, timeless and space less.

Indological perspective has been explained. We formed that ‘In this view of the Indian society, there was no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between perspective, normative statements derived from the texts and the actual behaviour of group as mentioned by Bernard Cohn (1990).

The unit describes the continuing influence of Indological approach which is evident as scholars emphasize the role of traditions, groups rather than individual as the basis of social relations and religion, ethics and philosophy as the basis of social organization in India.

Indological approach emphasizes the role of traditions, groups rather than individuals as the basis of social relations and religion, ethics and philosophy as the basis of social organization. Indology is representative of people's behaviour or that guides people's behaviour in a significant way. We have discussed in the unit why Dumont, along with Pocock argued for a synthesis of Indology and sociology.

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## 1.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) Indology is the study of historical accounts traveler's accounts, religious, literature, and scriptures etc. of the earliest writings in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic languages on India conducted by several scholars who desired to understand Indian society and culture in a civilization perspective.
- 2) Sociologists like Dumot and Pocock (1957) like some others, believed that sociologists must familiarize themselves with the classical literature on India provided by the Indologists to understand Indian society and culture in their sociological analysis. A sociological study of India lies at the urban of sociology and Indology.

## Check Your Progress II

Accounts of foreign travelers from third century BC to that of the historians in the courts of Indian rulers till about 15<sup>th</sup> century we find range of writings based on both first hand observations of Indian society and secondary analysis of the Sanskrit texts, like Megasthenes, historians like Al-Biruni and later Abul Fazl Allami the early Colonialists, i.e. the Portuguese adventurers and administrators, the merchants and the missionaries who continued to write about India till the advent of the British rule.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Orientalists like William Jones, Henry Maine, Max Mueller, and later Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Alexander Dow, Alexander Cunningham we find their combined effort to systematically build what can be referred to as the Indological view of India.

## Check Your Progress III

The Indologists in the process of giving importance to the text as the only source of knowledge about Indian society and culture, paid little attention to society's inequalities, diversities, dialectics and exploitations. They exaggerated the spirituality of Indian civilization and hardly made any effort to study the material culture.

- i) Firstly, they overemphasized the centrality of the Brahmins and their dominant status in Indian society.
- ii) Second, they gave a fixed view of Indian society with no regional variation let alone historical changes over time.

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# UNIT 2 COLONIAL DISCOURSE\*

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## Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Colonial Perspective
- 2.3 The Missionary Perspective
- 2.4 The Administrative Perspective
  - 2.4.1 Census and Survey
  - 2.4.2 Villages and Cities
- 2.5 Influence of Discourse on Sociology of India
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 References
- 2.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this Unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the study of Indian society and culture through systematic organisation of knowledge under the colonial rule;
- differentiate between the Missionary and the Administrative views under the Colonial Perspective on Indian society; and
- explain the specific influences of the colonial discourse in shaping the sociology of India.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit, on Indological discourse, you learnt about how the Indological perspectives provided concepts, theories and framework, which emerged from the study of Indian civilisation by different scholars. They primarily adopted a historical and comparative approach. Their understanding of Indian society and its structure is largely based on their study of classical texts and literature, such as the Vedas, Upanishads and the Puranas. One View of Indian society derived from the study of texts with the help of Brahman scholars and presented Indian society as fixed, stagnant and timeless and with no socio-cultural variations. Indian society was seen as a set of rules which every Hindu followed.

In this unit you will learn about the colonial discourse, i.e. the perspectives given by scholars on society in India during the colonial period when the Britishers ruled over India.

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## 2.2 THE COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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N B Halhead presented first compilation of Hindu Dharamshastra (1776) William Jones, Colebrook were other scholars who did notable work on India. H H Risley

under whom first census of India (1872) took place to JH Hutton last census commissioner helped later scholars with the data like, Morgan, McLennon, Lubbock, Tylor, Starcke and Frazer.

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw considerable literature by missionaries on Indian society like Claudius Buchanan, William Carey, William Ward, Sir John Shore who were critical of Hinduism and saw hope in the spread of Christianity.

The aim of the British colonial interest in studying the traditional Indian society proved useful in laying the foundation for further studies of Indian society. The emphasis of the studies was on how to govern India better.

- After the arrival of the British, knowledge of Indian society began to grow very rapidly from 1760 onwards.
- Indian economy and polity changed tremendously.
- Indian society went through many changes including beginning of the modern era with introduction of industries. Posts and telegraph, railways and modern education, growth of cities, new occupations, etc., were some of the major developments leading to rapid changes in Indian society.

With the British colonialism, particular observations can be made about the process of cultural changes and nature of social change in the Indian social systems. Bernard S. Cohn (1990) argues that society of India offered a much different situation as compared to American Indian or African colonies since eighteenth century, in India:

- there was a full-fledged agricultural economy,
- political institution based on Kingship,
- a legal system based on partially written law,
- taxation,
- record keeping, and
- a set of cultural religious systems both of Hindus and Muslims.

He argues therefore that the British study of Indian languages was important to the colonial project of control and command.

Cohn (1970) also asserts that an arena of colonial power that seemed most inclined to native local influences, mostly in the field of law, in fact became responsible for the changes of noticeably British notions about how to regulate a '*different*' kind of colonial society. It was not only important to have a system of knowledge of Indian society but also give rise to forms of constructing an India that could be better packaged and ruled by the colonial powers. The central problems that surfaced and had to be understood was how to develop a political-military system that would leave the day-to-day functioning of the government in Indian hands and yet arrive at a successful formula to have continuous supervision over the Indian subjects.

Some Indologists also tried to search for common grounds between the rulers and the ruled and looked for similarity.

For example-

“The Indologists through their studies (also) made the point that the governance of the old and Mughal India was based on documented laws. The political system was not arbitrary. Scholars of Asiatic Society like William Jones, backed by Max Mueller and other renowned scholars who with their inter-disciplinary research, (proved) that both the Europeans and Indians shared a common origin somewhere, as Aryans under the thick and fur of the slopes of Caucasus mountains, and then migrated to their present day habitations” (The Colonial Political Perspective, Biplab Dasgupta, pp. 31 *Social Scientist*, Vol. 31, No. 3/4 (Mar. - Apr., 2003), pp. 27-56).

### Check Your Progress I

1) How was Indian society different from other British colonies?

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2) Why was the need felt by the British to study Indian society?

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## 2.3 THE MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE

This view developed through the writings of early Evangelical Priests (Protestants who believed in spreading the teachings of Christianity through conversion by persuasion) in the late eighteenth century. Charles Grant, one of the earliest Evangelical writer, who served as a commercial official in Bengal in 1774-1790, wrote a pamphlet in 1792 ‘*Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain particularly with respect to Great morals, and on the means of Improving it*’. His views on Indian society can be summed up in the following quotation:

*Upon the whole, then, we cannot avoid recognizing in the people of Hindostan, a race of men lamentably degenerate and base, retaining but a feeble sense of moral obligation, yet obstinate in their disregard of what they know to be right, governed by malevolent and licentious passions, strongly exemplifying the effects*

*produced on society by great and general corruption of manners and sunk in misery by their vices... (Great Britain, House of Commons, 1833, vol 14, pg.41 (quoted in Cohn 1990:144).*

What is evident from the above statement is the view they held of Indian society as being essentially undignified as compared to the British society and the only way to improve is by allowing the British to do so and by following their ways. The main cause behind such 'degeneration' of course was rooted in the religious system that is the base of Indian culture and the only way that Indians can be saved recover from their situation would be through the missionary campaigns that would convert the Indian population to Christianity.

Unlike the Indologists, the attempt was to condemn Indian society and its ways by citing specific translations from the Sanskrit texts. Additionally, some of the practices like sati, purdah, sale of children to slavery, cow worship, idol worship and the caste system were taken to be everyday examples of the problems and ills, suffered by Indian society. The extremely negative evaluation of the Indian society and caste system was deeply connected with their need to establish Christianity across the subcontinent as a viable alternative especially to those who were at the bottom-most level of the hierarchy and felt exploited in the caste system.

Early missionaries saw caste system as an obstacle to conversion to Christianity. The writings of Abbe Dubois, a French missionary and author of an influential account in 1816 titled as Description of the Characters, manners, and customs of the people of India, and of their institutions, religious, and civil noted the stranglehold of caste system on Indians. 'Dubois thought that the Brahmins cleverly constructed the caste system by tuning civil institution into a sacred and immutable feature of society for the perpetuation of Brahmanical supremacy (Forrester, 1980: 26, quoted in Book 1 MSO-004, IGNOU, 2005, Pg. 61).

It needs to be mentioned here that caste system was criticised because the missionaries felt that it thwarted their attempts to convert the Hindus into Christians. Even after conversion, many Hindus continued to be guided by caste rules.

Interestingly though in their search for the proof of a generally corrupting Hindu society, these missionaries made major contributions to the empirical study of the Indian society. Moreover, the need for translation of Bible into vernaculars led to socio-linguistic study of Indian languages. This in turn gave rise to more systematic and written accounts of the lived realities of the different caste and occupational groups. The missionaries also helped in the spread of modern education in different parts of India. They went to work in the remotest areas, like amongst tribals in the forests and worked with zeal and fervor for the weak and the poor.

In their analysis however, while the missionaries agreed with the Indologists and later the Orientalists (scholars of Eastern world) about the central principles of Indian society both did not attempt to fit the facts of political organisation, land tenure, actual legal systems and commercial structure of the society into it. Orientalists and missionaries accepted and agreed that:

- Religious ideas and practices underlay all social structure;

- Primacy of the Brahman as the maintainer of the sacred tradition through his control of the knowledge of the sacred text; and
- Brahmanical theory of the four Varnas was accepted and saw the origin of the castes in the inter mixture through marriage of the members of the four Varnas (Cohn, 1987).

The difference lay mainly in their evaluation of Indian culture. While the Orientalists and Indologists had immense admiration of an ancient Indian civilisation and were deeply aggrieved by the fall of Indian society from that ideal, the missionaries were of the view that there was no glorious past and it has always been filled with absurdities.

According to Cohn, the approach adopted by missionaries can also be attributed to their social backgrounds. Unlike the Indologists and Orientalists who tended to be from upper class backgrounds and better educated, the missionaries, particularly the Baptists came from lower rungs of the British society with a zeal for reforming both their own and definitely the Indian society. They were determined to change the social order in favour of Christianity unlike Indologists and Orientalists who held a certain respect for Indian traditional system.

### Box 2.1

William Carey's *Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Acquiring of the Bengali Language*, published in 1801 from Sreerampore Press is perhaps the first sociolinguistic study of an Indian language.

Robert Caldwell's study titled *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* is the first systematic account of Dravidian languages and had a considerable indirect effect on the politics of South India.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) What was the Missionary perspective? Explain with examples.

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- 2) Compare the Missionary perspective with that of Orientalists and the Indologists.

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## 2.4 THE ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The interpretation of Indian society by the administrators, trained in British universities and indoctrinated by utilitarian rationalism was more pragmatic and more matter-of-fact. Their purpose was to understand Indian Society in order to exploit its resources.

The administrators sought to develop categories that would help them in ordering their ideas and actions relating to the life of the natives of India avoiding the enormous complexities characterizing it. For example, B. H. Baden-Powells' three volumes of *The Land System of British India* (1892) were not just a compilation of data but had a series of arguments about the nature of Indian village and its resources in relation to the state and its demand over these resources. Baden-Powell recognised there were in general two claims on the produce of the soil, the state's and the landholder's. He postulated that the government derived its revenue "by taking a share of the actual grain heap on the threshing floor of each holding". In order to ensure the collection of this share a wide range of intermediaries between the state and the grain heap developed. They assert in their turn varying degrees of control or ownership/possession right over land and its produce. In addition, rights over the land were established by the conquest.

British scholarly administrators posted in different parts of India, for example, Risley, Dalton and O'Malley in East India, Crooks in Northern India, wrote encyclopedic inventories about the tribes and castes of India, which even today provide the basic information about the life and culture of the people of the respective regions. The purpose of these studies was to familiarise the government officials and private persons with classified descriptions about castes and tribes in India with a view to ensuring effective colonial administration.

The contribution of great British Indologist Sir William Jones was immense as he began the study of Sanskrit and Indology and is also quite well known for establishing the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1787. The *Laws of Manu* was translated by Jones in 1794.

The period of 1757 to 1785 was a time in which the officials of the East India Company in Bengal had to develop an administrative system capable of maintaining law and order and producing in a regular manner income to support the administrative, military and commercial activities of the company and also provide a profit. The assessment and regular collection of land revenue required considerable knowledge of the structure of Indian society. Accordingly, inquiries into the nature of land tenure in Bengal were made by collecting documents and records of previous rulers. In addition, some British, official and non-official, out of interest and curiosity began to study and write on Indian society from first-hand observation in somewhat objective fashion. For example, William Tenant, a military chaplain in his two volume work, *Indian Recreations: Consisting Chiefly of Strictures on the Domestic and Rural Economy of the Mahomedans and Hindoos* (1804) based his information on personal observations, 'conversations and writings of several intelligent natives' and 'oral conversation with...military servants'.



In short, using the classic anthropological techniques available at the time, i.e. observations and interviews with key native/local informants. This particular document and others like H.T. Colebrook's *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* provide detailed and careful description of rural society.

### 2.4.1 Census and Surveys

But these early works proved insufficient as East India Company's territory rapidly increased and the British became aware of the baffling variety of peoples, histories, political forms, systems of land tenure and religious practices. They realised that the relatively haphazard reporting of sociological information must be more systematised and supported by field surveys the goal of which was acquisition of better and more accurate information. One of the earliest and famous of these was contribution of Dr. Francis Buchanan. He carried out an extensive survey in 1807 that was never completely published, but in many ways was the forerunner of a continuing effort undertaken by the British to collect, collate and publish official and scholarly information about all aspects of Indian society. It is in these attempts that we find the emergence of a sociological entity of India. For instance, the 'official' view of caste treated it as an empirical category, a 'thing' concrete and measurable and above all had definable characteristics such as:

- endogamy (marriage within ones own caste and/ or subcaste),
- commensality (eating together) rules,
- fixed occupation,
- common ritual practices.

The census exercise created the 'fixed' category of caste from 'social lived reality' for the purpose of British administration. The first census of 1872 under Lord Mayo was mainly an exercise where open ended questions were asked, and the categories of religion, caste and race were used.

The data collected was classified into different categories to separate one caste from the other. The most famous classification is H.H. Risley's in which he reduced the 2000 odd castes with the help of census data, had found seven types:

- 1) tribal,
- 2) functional,
- 3) sectarian;
- 4) castes formed by crossing;
- 5) national castes;
- 6) castes formed by migration; and
- 7) castes formed by changing customs.

The questions that grew out of such an elaborate census were in regard of the origin and functionality of caste in a sociological sense, unlike the question of historical origin posed by the Orientalists and some Indologists.

Henceforth, the official researchers of caste although recognised that origin of caste is rooted in the Brahmanical theory they assumed to arrive at a more functional, somewhat ‘field view’ of caste. Nesfield regarded caste as having its roots in the division of labour and the occupation was the central determining factor in the system. Risley argued for a racial origin of caste. Ibbetson saw the major force to the formation of caste in ‘tribal origins’. J.H. Hutton compiled a list of fourteen ‘more obvious factors which have been indicated as probably contributing to the emergence and development of the caste system’. The ‘official’ view was not merely an outgrowth of the ways in which information was collected but also reflects anthropological interests and theories of the period 1870-1910. The general theoretical books written about the caste system implicitly reflect the works of Morgan, McLennan, Lubbock, Tylor, Starcke and Frazer. The attempt was to compare, classify and arrive at some general anthropological solution about the facts, of customs, myths, proverbs and practices collected from the field based studies.

Although the first ever official attempt for a field based ethnographic research survey was undertaken in 1901 under Risley and the need was justified on the grounds that “the primitive beliefs and uses in India would be completely destroyed or transformed” and “for purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease and almost every form of executive action” (Cohn 1990:157). This agenda also finally seals the interest of the Raj to truly and completely control India. This survey later developed as a part of the Census of 1901 with an elaborate classification of castes and sub-castes.

#### 2.4.2 Villages and Cities

Other than caste, the administrative idea of India was based on the category of ‘village’. The perspective developed and forwarded was that India was primarily composed of villages. Charles Metcalfe, described Indians as living in “village communities” which “are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations” (Cohn 1971 reprint 2000: 86). The villages therefore came to be seen as self-sufficient units both economically and politically. Three intellectual-cultural strands can be found in the making of this myth and its perpetuation. The first is the romantic, idealistic and evolutionary myth of the British past – ‘countryside as gentry surrounded by happy peasants’; Marxist notions about evolution of society from a communal property holding phase to the rise of private property and therefore India being backward as having the communal phase of property ownership; the nationalists stand reinforcing the idea of an idyllic past so as to pose a successful critique of British imperialism.

The ‘caste’ and the ‘village’ view combined together helped the British rulers frame revenue laws, create the class of zamindars and also force commercial agricultural practices.

#### Box 2.3: Mackenzie’s Collection

“Colin Mackenzie, the first Surveyor General of India...was obsessed with an interest in collecting narratives and facts to supplement the maps he and his associates made of Hyderabad, Mysore and other regions of the southern peninsula. On his own initiative and with his own resources he hired and



trained a group of Brahman assistants who helped him collect local histories of kingly dynasties, chiefly families, castes, villages, temples, monasteries as well as other local traditions and religious philosophical texts in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese, Malyalam and Hindi (pp. 126).

From the letters and diaries of the native agents of Mackenzie, those early research assistants, or 'native information' of colonial ethnography and historiography we learn of course that the process of collecting was anything but neutral, that the sociology of knowledge might have been early colonial but hardly pre-colonial. First, it is clear that these agents, themselves Brahmans assumed that the only knowledge worth having would necessarily be mediated through Brahmans... Whenever an agent went to a new town, he looked for books by first looking for learned Brahmans (pp. 128-129).

These Brahman research assistants were thus agents *of* and *in* a complex social reality.... On the one hand, they constructed and represented a Brahmanic sociology of knowledge, one that has already been well documented in the construction of legal codes for Indians under colonial institutions, but which also set in motion a wide range of apparatuses which led to the flip side of nationalism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India – the communalist and sometimes separatist anti-Brahman movements of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra. On the other hand, they were agents of and for, the British. There was often considerable and justifiable concern about the implications of handing texts, traditions, knowledge, anti-facts etc. over to these agents” (pp. 129-130, Dirks, 1997).

Despite several research studies by Henry Maine and Baden-Powell on Indian villages that discussed village level conflict, regional variations of villages in terms of both structure and culture within India etc., the categorical and conceptual thinking about villages remained fixed at the stage where it was just a 'type' in the evolutionary progress of human society. This directed attention away from internal politics at village, questions of social relations, patterns of wealth distribution. That is in reality even as students of social anthropology they were not interested in the actual conditions of life in Indian villages but with general theoretical questions derived from the social theory of the day.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century we also find several emerging problems of famine, riots, land alienation etc., in the rural economy which deeply troubled the colonial masters, shaking their somewhat simplistic understanding of village India. As a result, we find more extensive and important statistical data as well as suggestions for administrative and legislative changes for correcting the ground level faults. Hence we find studies like that of Harold Mann based on data about “numerous economic and agricultural questions by the close study of a single village.”

The colonialists also attempted to arrive at an understanding of the urban structure in India. Both Walter Hamilton and Robert Montgomery Martin gave lists of cities with population estimated in 1820 and 1855 respectively but none were reflective of the reality. These early observers greatly overestimated the populations of the larger cities, mostly because the European eye saw streets to be crowded and congested. The narrow streets with buildings right up to the edge of the street; markets and pilgrim places crowded with people and it therefore

is impossible to arrive at any conclusive statistics. Cohn (1970) however is of the opinion that more than statistics what is important is to understand the nature and consequences of urban living in India in the early or the late nineteenth century. One must remember that the nature of Indian cities were very different than that of cities in highly industrialised economy and society. Indian cities performed four major functions:

- a) economic – as a centre for marketing, trade, commerce and craft production;
- b) military, frequently as military centres with forts or walled areas for defense purposes;
- c) political as centres of political life; and
- d) religious – i.e. as sacred centres with ritual specialists, scholars and devotees.

It is also equally important to remember that while all four functions were mostly found together, cities differed in their dominating function. Also most northern and many southern cities were established out of political considerations, as strategic centres of control. At the same time, early nineteenth century cities had different lifestyles, cosmopolitan, local and regional, Benaras or Kashi exemplifying to be the most traditional religious and culturally vibrant city had people of and yet the most cosmopolitan of cities.

**Check Your Progress III**

- 1) What was the administrative view? Explain with examples.

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- 2) How did census and survey help British in understanding Indian society?

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- 3) How did Britishers view Indian Village and cities?

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## 2.5 INFLUENCE OF COLONIAL DISCOURSE ON SOCIOLOGY OF INDIA

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The interest of the British rulers gave rise to the research on India. Surveys to collect a huge body of details regarding different aspects of Indian society and social institutions, such as caste, family, marriage, customary laws etc. These information were used by different scholars to study Indian society, culture, polity and economy. Both the census data and the Imperial Gazettes helped social anthropologists and sociologists to study Indian society. Many of the village studies were conducted due to their influence. Anthropological studies of India both in terms of interest, particular subject matter, methodology and theories of and about the caste as a category for administration, village, cities in India find their origin due to this impact. The role of missionaries and administration in the further enhancement of the British colonial interest in studying Indian society proved useful in laying the foundation for further studies of Indian society.

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have discussed how colonial rule impacted study of Indian society. Colonial narratives would be divided into missionary view which developed from the writings of early missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and administrative view, the purpose of which was to ensure effective colonial control. The detailed surveys, census information and other studies by the British helped in shaping system of knowledge about Indian society and led to further research in many fields.

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## 2.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) Society of India offered a much different situation as compared to American Indian or African colonies since by eighteenth century, in India:

- a) there was a full-fledged agricultural economy,
  - b) political institution based on Kingship,
  - c) a legal system based on partially written law,
  - d) taxation,
  - e) record keeping, and
  - f) Set of cultural religious systems both of Hindus and Muslims.
- 2) To regulate a 'different' kind of colonial society, it was not only important to have a system of knowledge of Indian society but also give rise to forms of constructing an India that could be better packaged and ruled by the colonial powers. The central problems that surfaced and had to be understood was how to develop a political-military system that would leave the day-to-day functioning of the government in Indian hands and yet arrive at a successful formula to have continuous supervisions over the Indian subjects. The emphasis of the studies on India' was on how to govern India better. British study of Indian languages was important to the colonial project of control and command.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) The Missionary perspective to Indian society was according to them as being essentially undignified as compared to the British society. The main cause behind such 'degeneration' of course was rooted in the religious system that is the base of Indian culture and the only way that Indians can recover from their situation would be through the missionary campaigns that would convert the Indian population to Christianity. (The need for translation of Bible into vernaculars) led to socio-linguistic study of Indian languages. The missionaries also helped in the spread of modern education in different parts of India, went to work in the remotest areas, like amongst tribals in the forests and worked with zeal and fervor for the weak and the poor to offer Christianity as a viable alternative especially to those who were at the bottom-most level of the hierarchy and felt exploited in the caste system.
- 2) In their analysis however, while the missionaries agreed with the Indologists (scholars of Indian society) and later the Orientalists (scholars of Eastern world) about the central principles of Indian society both did not attempt to fit the facts of political organization, land tenure, actual legal systems and commercial structure of the society into it.

The difference lay mainly in their evaluation of Indian culture. While the Orientalists and Indological had immense admiration of an ancient Indian civilisation and were deeply aggrieved by the fall of Indian society from that ideal, the missionaries were of the view that there was no glorious past and it has always been filled with absurdities. Unlike Indologists and Orientalists who tended to be from upper class backgrounds and better educated, the missionaries, particularly the Baptists came from lower rungs of the British society with a zeal for reforming both their own and definitely the Indian society. They were determined to change the social order in favour of Christianity unlike Indologists and Orientalists who held a certain respect for Indian traditional system.

- 1) The administrative view was to familiarize the government officials and private persons with classified descriptions about castes and tribes in India with a view to ensuring effective colonial administration. The interpretation of Indian society by the administrators, trained in British universities and indoctrinated by utilitarian rationalism was more pragmatic and more matter-of-fact, as their purpose was to understand it in order to exploit its resources. British scholarly administrators posted in different parts of India, for example, Riskey, Dalton and O'Malley in East India, Crooks in Northern India, wrote encyclopedic inventories about the tribes and castes of India, which even today provide the basic information about the life and culture of the people of the respective regions. Sir William Jones began the study of Sanskrit and Indology and is also quite well known for establishing the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1787. The Laws of Manu was translated by Jones in 1794.
- 2) Charles Metcalfe, described Indians as living in “village communities” which “are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations”. The British supported the romantic, idealistic and evolutionary myth of the British past – ‘countryside as gentry surrounded by happy peasants’. The ‘caste’ and the ‘village’ view combined together helped the British rulers frame revenue laws, create the class of zamindars and also force commercial agricultural practices. Despite several research studies by Maine and Baden-Powell on India villages that discussed village level conflict, regional variations of villages in terms of both structure and culture within India etc., the categorical and conceptual thinking about villages remained fixed at the stage where it was just a ‘type’ in the evolutionary progress of human society.

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## UNIT 3 NATIONALIST DISCOURSE\*

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Concept of Nation and Nationalism
- 3.3 Indian Nation and Nationalism: Some Major Discourses
  - 3.3.1 A.R. Desai's Views on Nationalism
  - 3.3.2 Partha Chatterjee's Views on Nationalism
  - 3.3.3 M. Chaudharis Views on Nationalism
- 3.4 Post Independent India and its Challenges
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 References
- 3.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the concept of nation and nationalism;
- explain the Nationalist discourse in both colonial and post-colonial India;
- describe views of leading Indian scholars on Indian nationalism; and
- analyze post-colonial nationality discourse.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit, we discussed colonial discourse in which we tried to explain how Britishers viewed Indian society. You learnt about the administrative perspective and the missionary perspectives.

This unit will discuss the nationalist narrative to understand Indian society. To begin with, we will discuss the concept, and idea of nation and nationalism and its definitions. Further, we will discuss the various approaches to understand Indian society through nationalistic perspective. We will elaborate Indian nationalism during the colonial period and the different debates on Indian nationalism during colonial period. Finally, we will discuss nationalism and the post independence situation of India especially the nationalist movements on the lines of ethnicity, caste, region etc.

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### 3.2 CONCEPT OF NATION AND NATIONALISM

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The concept of a nation was a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, which emerged in the West and later spread to other colonies of Europe i.e. Asia, Africa etc. A nation can be defined as a group of people who share common territory, history, language, psychological make-up, etc. The most important elements of a nation is that it is always sovereign/ independent/ autonomous. Hence, in classical

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\* Contributed by Prafulla Kumar Nath, Assistant Professor, Assam University



understanding of nation, a nation is recognised only when it is independent. At the same time, in the sovereign territory the members share a common history, language, culture etc. It is the considered view of historians that nationalism in the modern sense emerged with the growth of industrial capitalism or print capitalism and was then sustained by a variety of factors – by notions of community based on language, ethnicity or religion or by the rivalry and competition among states and imagined communities. As such in 19<sup>th</sup> century or till the 1950s decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the terms nation and state many a times were used synonymously. It implies that to form a sovereign state there must be a nation or conversely only a nation can be formed if it is a sovereign state. Such classical definition holds that a nation should govern itself.

The most accepted classical definition of nation was given by Stalin who defined nation as a “historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in community of culture” (Stalin 1991:6).

A definition of nation is not easy. It is both difficult and contentious. The main trouble with any attempt to define nation is that at any given time, we would find a large number of nations that do not conform to that definition. It would thus appear that the actual world of nations is so diverse (in spite of their commonalities) that no single definition can hope to include them all. It is partly for this reason that scholars have generally refrained from providing a universal definition of nation, applicable to all situations. They have found it easier to describe specific nations. It has been much more difficult to abstract certain broad principles on the basis of specific experiences. Ernest Gellner, another important theorist on this subject, identified two attributes that could possibly form part of the generic definition:

- a) culture, and
- b) will.

But he was himself aware of the inadequacy of either, and indeed both of them in correctly identifying all types of nations. To quote him again:

“What then is this contingent, but in our age seemingly universal and normative, idea of the nation? Discussion of two very makeshift, temporary definitions will help to pinpoint this elusive concept.

- 1) Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communication.
- 2) Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation.

In other words, nations make the man; nations are the artefacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognise certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. Each of these provisional definitions, the cultural and the voluntaristic, has some merit. Each of them singles out an element which is of real importance in the understanding of nationalism. But neither is adequate. Definitions of culture,

presupposed by the first definition, in the anthropological rather than the normative sense, are notoriously difficult and unsatisfactory. It is probably best to approach this problem by using this term [nation] without attempting too much in the way of formal definition.” (1983, p. 7)

‘Modern idea of nationalism emerged from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe out of a combination of three strands which composed it:

- 1) Enlightenment as a liberal conception of political self determination (Rousseau, JS Mills and others),
- 2) The French revolutionary idea of the community of equal citizens, and
- 3) The German conception of a people formed by history, tradition and culture.

As a final process-product, nationalism was thus found tied to principles of freedom, equality and collective sharing of history and culture.’ (Diaspora and Transnational Communities, MSOE-002 Book 2 pg. 148).

Nationalism on the other hand is the sense of belongingness of individual(s) to the nation and loyalty to the nation. Such sense of belongingness or loyalty come(s) because of his/her birth, in that language, culture etc.

Ernest Gellner (1983) defined these terms in the opening paragraph of his book:

“Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind” (Ernest Gellner 1983: 1).

**Box 3.0**

The core themes of Nationalist Ideology

- 1) Humanity is naturally divided into nations.
- 2) Each nation has its peculiar character.
- 3) The source of all political power is the nation, the whole collectivity.
- 4) For freedom and self realization, men must identify with a nation.
- 5) Nations can only be fulfilled in their own states.
- 6) Loyalty to the nation states over rides other loyalties.
- 7) The primary condition of global freedom and harmony is the strengthening of the nation-state.

(Ref. – Adam Smith)

**Check Your Progress I**

- 1) What is a nation?

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- 2) What are the three strands through which modern idea of nationalism emerged?

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### 3.3 INDIAN NATION AND NATIONALISM: SOME MAJOR DISCOURSES

Before colonial power came to India, the region India was divided into various small state principalities and dynasties. Due to its diversity in terms of religion, culture, language, and region it was widely believed that India cannot form a nation as it did not have a common culture, language or a common history rather it had too many diversities. Factors which helped India's 'nationhood':

- 1) The British brought those various segments under a singular administrative purview as well as introduced various modern institutions such as bureaucracy, western education, law, court, modes of communication, printing press etc. (Such establishments though brought changes to Indian society but conversely it helped the colonial power to exploit the Indian people as well as other natural resources).
- 2) The rise of anti-colonial movement the then leadership left no stone unturned to establish India as a nation. After the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, it accelerated the movement and mobilised people of various regions to bring unity.
- 3) They created some symbols to bind those diversities such as common language (Hindi), common flag, national song/anthem, etc. Thus despite the diversities a common sentiment was created among the diverse sections. These are widely known as unity in diversity. However, later different freedom fighters like Gandhi, Nehru and others added new narratives in nationalist movement of India such as non-violence, non-cooperation, civil disobedience movement etc. to accelerate the movement.
- 4) In the context of Indian nationalism as opposed to European model of nationalism, anti-colonial movement also played a big role. Many scholars argue that the freedom struggle of India was more anti-colonial than national. The struggle could bring all the sections of society on a single platform against the British.

During last 200-250 years or so, Indian nationalism has undergone various changes. In the colonial period, the nationalism was basically anti-colonial and the leaders of the freedom struggle could bring all the sections under one umbrella although there were contestations in various phases. Such contestations came from both right wing Hindu and Muslim leaders. As such, a kind of religious nationalism in the line of culture emerged during the colonial period. Moreover,

contestation also came from the Dalits and the lower castes groups especially under the leadership of Ambedkar. The unaddressed issues especially of the Dalits, and smaller nationalities, later included as Indian state has to face in the form of resistance and protest those are largely known as ethnicity movements. At the same time radical right wing Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism also grew where these groups tried to narrate nationalism religious lines.

In the post-colonial period, the various sub-nationals, regional and tribal movements across India challenged the very idea of India as a nation state or India as a nation. Many a times the nationalist discourse of various groups gives us the scope to understand the regional disparity, diversity etc. Hence, the nationality discourse is an important theory to understand Indian society both in the colonial and postcolonial period.

Apart from various classical ideas of Indian nation and nationalism, there are several other discussions and interpretations to understand the nationalist discourse in India. Among them A. R. Desai, D.D. Kosambi, Partha Chatterjee etc. have presented new dimensions to understand Indian nationalism. Desai interpreted Indian nationalism from Marxist perspective where he looked into the social background of Indian nationalism. Partha Chatterjee's thesis on Indian nationalism is the critique of Benedict Anderson's idea of nation and nationalism and he discussed that the formation of Indian nationalism was different from Western formation of nation. Here we will discuss A. R. Desai and Partha Chatterjee to understand nationalism in colonial period and Paul Brass to understand the nationality movement of various ethnic groups in independent India.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) What challenges India faced in the formation of 'nationhood'?

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### 3.3.1 A.R. Desai is Views on Nationalism

A. R Desai was one of the leading sociologists of India. He represents the Marxist school of thought in understanding Indian society and analysed the social background of Indian nationalism through analysing the material conditions. His book *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1946) was one of the path-breaking works to understand social conditions of colonial India. *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism* (1960) another important work of Desai.

Desai looked into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times to understand the social background of Indian nationalism from Marxist point of view. During pre-colonial period in India the feudal class dominated the peasant' class. This feudal class, many of which were under the Muslim rulers exploited the peasants.

Desai in *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1946) has analysed the comprehensive understanding of the structural transformations in Indian society during colonial period. He investigated into the production relations during feudalism, its transformations, and the rise of capitalist forces and finally how nationalism emerged in such social conditions. Desai analysed why and how nationalism in India emerged and what were the social and material conditions. Desai tried to understand various factors that led to the nation formation in various corners of the world. For him the development of nationalism in different countries followed and was determined by various social and cultural history of the respective country along with “political, economic, and social structures, and the specific character of the psychological and economic traits of the social classes which were the vanguard of the struggle for a national social existence in those countries. Every nation was thus born and forged in a unique way” (xxx1).

Desai understood the stimulus of national sentiment hence he said such sentiments are dominant emotion in today’s world. All kinds of contemporary movements such as economic, cultural, political etc. were inspired by such emotions of nationalism.

Investigating into the history of Indian nationalism, Desai finds its root in colonialism. He holds that the actions and inter-actions of several subjective and objective factors and forces developed in Indian society, helped in formation of Indian nationalism. But, he argues that the process of development of Indian nationalism was too complex due to its economic as well as other factors. The social structure of Indian society was quite unique. Unlike the medieval European societies and countries the economic base of Indian society was different. Moreover, the geographical, linguistics, cultural differences make the region unique and complex. But British rule in India despite such differences provided the space for rise and development of Indian nationalism. Desai looking into the relationship between British rule and Indian nationalism argues “about the conditions of the political subjection of the Indian people under the British rule. The advanced British nation for its own purpose, radically changed the economic structure of Indian society, established a centralised state, and introduced modern education, modern means of communications and other institutions. This resulted in the growth of new social classes and the unleashing of new social forces unique in themselves. These social forces by their very nature came into conflict with British imperialism and became the basis of the motive power for the rise and development of Indian nationalism” (xxxv). (Ref.)

Desai has analysed the fundamental economic transformation of Indian society during colonial period. He behaved that the economic transformation was one of the important material pre-requisites for uniting the diverse population of the region. At the same time he also addressed the role of other factors such as modern transport, new education, press, and others, in contributing towards the unification of the Indian people and in engendering a nationalist consciousness among them.

Desai classified the development of Indian nationalism into five phases:

### 1) **The First Phase**

In the first phase, the Indian nationalism had a narrow social base. The educational institutions were established during the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century by the British could produce a set of new educated Indians who studied western culture and greatly assimilated its democratic and nationalistic values. Those educated intelligentsia formed the first stratum of Indian nationalism. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first exponent of the idea of Indian nation. He and his group also propagated idea. The various social Indians were been religious reform movements propagated his ideas. The idea of the educated remould the “Indian society and religion in the spirit of the new principles of democracy, rationalism, and nationalism. In fact, these movements were the expression of the rising national democratic consciousness among a section of the Indian people” (ibid: 409). They also spoke about freedom of press as well as put demand for inclusion of voice in the administration. The first phase ended by 1885 finished with the formation of Indian National Congress.

## 2) **Second Phase**

The second phase roughly covered the period 1885-1905. The liberal intelligentsia who ran the Congress were the leaders of the national movement. During this period due to the expansion of western education as well as growth of trade in India and outside India a new merchant class and educated elites developed in India. The rise of the modern industrial set up in India resulted in growth of industrial class. This class started gaining strength. This class became close to the Congress which adopted the “programme of industrialisation of the country and in 1905 actively organised the Swadeshi campaign”. This phase witnessed the Indianisation of services as well as many Indians associated themselves with the administrative and state machinery. This phase also saw rise of militancy in India.

## 3) **Third Phase**

The third phase identified by Desai between 1905-1918. In the third phase liberals were replaced by the extremists. It was a period of militancy and inclusion of lower middle class. The extremist could instil a feeling of national self respect and self confidence. Desai sees that during this period the leaders attempted to base such consciousness on a Hindu philosophy. Thus, it could weaken the secular character of the movement. At the same time the upper class Muslims also developed political consciousness and founded the political organization called Muslim League.

## 4) **Fourth Phase**

The fourth phase starts from 1918 until the civil obedience movement 1930-34. It was a period of expansion of the nationalist movement, which was earlier limited to the middle class and lower middle class to the inclusion of masses. Desai sees several factors which brought about national awakening among the Indian masses. He holds, “The post-war economic crisis, the disillusionment about the government promises, and the increased repression by the state had seriously affected the people including the peasantry and the working-class and they were in a state of great ferment” (ibid: 412).

Moreover, the democratic movement of many countries as well as socialist revolution in Russia encouraged the Indian masses. At the same time the

Indian capitalists became economically strong during the war due to industrial expansions. The *swadeshi* or the boycott slogan of the Congress eventually helped the Indian capitalists who financially supported the movement.

### 5) Fifth Phase

The fifth phase of Indian Nationalism and the Nationalist movement for freedom of India covers the period 1934-39, the year of outbreak of the World War II. This phase shows the disappointment with Gandhi's ideology by various groups specially the rise of various groups, inside Congress. Many Congressmen lost their confidence in Gandhian ideology of Non-violence and *swadeshi*. The Socialist Party took the causes of workers and, peasants on the class lines. The rise of depressed classes, dissidents formed the Forward Bloc by Subhas Chandra Bose. We also see the rise of Muslim League during this period.

Thus, Desai presented a Marxist analysis of the Indian nationalism looking into various aspects of Indian national history.

### Check Your Progress III

Fill in the Blanks

- During pre-colonial period in India the ..... class dominated the peasants' class.
- Desai classified the development of Indian nationalism into ..... phases.
- The first phase ended by ..... finished with the formation of Indian National Congress.
- In the third phase liberals were replaced by the .....

### 3.2.2 Partha Chatterjee's Views on Nationalism

Benedict Anderson's ideas on nation and nationalism are one of the most accepted theories in the discourse of nation and nationalism. His book *Imagined Communities* (1991) opened up new ideas to understand nation and nationalism. Anderson argues that nation is an imagined community which is imagined into existence. For him, nation is an imagined community as well as a cultural artifact "...an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1991, 6).

It is imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". Thus nation is an abstract phenomenon where members of the community imagine themselves as a nation. It is also limited because "the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (*ibid*, 7).

Anderson investigated into the development of the idea of nation in western countries (Europe). He says that various sociological conditions helped in formation of the phenomenon. One such factor was the print media capitalism – the emergence of printing press in Europe. The rise of print media capitalism



needs a large market for maximizing their profit. Though the spoken language of a group may vary from area to area but the written language is same and mutually intelligible to each other. Hence newspaper, books in particular and print media capitalism in general could create a national imagination. (At the same time such forms of printing technology all printed news of various corners for which it became easy for a national imagination and was also possible to comprehending one another. Anderson argues “In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (*ibid*, 44)).

Anderson further argues that in the colonies of Europe, various nations were formed in the similar line.

Partha Chatterjee, on the other hand, criticising Anderson’s view on imagined community. He presented a different understanding about formation of the Indian Nationalism. Chatterjee questioned the view of Anderson that nation was a ‘modular’ form developed in Europe and later adopted by the colonies like India and others. The problem of such an assumption is that the west left no space for the colonies to imagine in the name of nation. Chatterjee questions if “the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?” (Chatterjee 1993, 5).

From such assumptions it can be concluded that the colonies of Europe either in Asia and Africa were only the constant consumers of modernity, they already had pre-set versions of nationalism available to them. More apparently, the imagination in relation to the nation is also always colonized.

Chatterjee arguing on the issue holds that Anderson ignores the spirituality – the space inside the internal domain, where he emphasised much on outside material domain to understand nationalism. Chatterjee, thus to analyse the Indian nationalism proposes a new dimension of nationalism i.e. the spiritual domain. He viewed the spiritual domain which was preserved in the inner space of households or in society as the fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in India. This inner domain carries the cultural markers of society which is essential for national imagination through culture.

Bringing examples from colonial Bengal to analyse Indian nationalism he gave the examples of language, culture, drama, schools, family, women etc. and their role in nation formation. In discussing language Chatterjee accepts Anderson’s idea of print media capitalism for development of a national language. In Bengal though the East India Company and Christian Missionaries published first the books in Bengali language during 18<sup>th</sup> century but the educated elites of Bengal who were bi-lingual took it as a project – a cultural project to publish more books in Bengali later. Chatterjee says, “to provide its mother tongue with the necessary linguistic equipment to enable it to become an adequate language for “modern” culture” (*ibid*, 7). Newspaper, magazine, were published, printing press was established by 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal. Moreover, literary bodies came up to give a standard shape of the language. All this happened outside the purview

of the colonial state. The language of a group is one of the basic domains for nationality formation. It also serves as a distinct *cultural identity* of a group where the colonial power had hardly any role. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bengali elites started establishing schools. It also produced “suitable educational literature” before the state became the contention. Outside the domain, of the state these schools were the space for generalising and normalising the new language and literature.

Chatterjee also talks about another inner domain i.e. family. For him, family played a vital role in preserving the national culture. The European notion of India and many of its traditions, religious practices was considered as barbaric were quite dominant during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Various practices specially related to women were strongly criticised by them such as the Sati Pratha . However, newly emerged elites in India were not ready to give the burden to the Europeans to reform those practices. The members of a nation must reform – they have the right to reform the problems of a nation themselves. The nation does not allow outsiders to interfere specially in the cultural domain of its society. Such notions could keep the cultural practices alive to sustain their cultural identity. Chatterjee also investigated the role of women in preserving cultural identity. Women are the carriers of cultural traditions. However, a new patriarchy emerged out of such practices but it helped in national imagination. The elites wanted their women to be new women but not like the women of the West.

Thus criticizing Anderson’s argument on imagined communities Chatterjee offers us a new model of Indian nationalism which holds that nationalism in India had a spiritual base. There were certain forms for which imagination of a nation in colonial period was possible.

### 3.3.3 M. Chaudharis’ Views on Nationalism

Chaudhuri (1999) looks into Indian anti-colonial nationalism through three dimensions where she emphasized the role of women in the same. These factors are:

- 1) it was based on ‘a well-developed critique of colonialism in its economic aspects and on an economic programme leading to independent economic development’ (Chandra B, 999: 17). Economic self- reliance, sovereignty, growth with equity were part of the very identity of Indian nationalism.
- 2) the movement was committed to political democracy and civil liberties, which were seen as building blocs of nation making (Chandra B: *ibid*). Political participation of women both in the national movement and then in the running of the independent state were therefore important.
- 3) Indian nationalism was also a cultural critique of colonialism and an assertion of ‘national culture’. In this assertion the image of ‘Indian womanhood’ was significant”. As nation and nationalism demand certain kinds of culture and tradition through which individual or group can connect himself/herself to its group. As Chatterjee argues in case of Indian nationalism, that Indian elites did not want the outsiders to intervene in the inner domain which was part of culture and women were largely its keepers. If any reform is needed it would be done by the nation itself not by outsiders.

### Check Your Progress IV

- 1) How was Indian nationalism different according to Partha Chatterjee?

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## 3.4 POST INDEPENDENT INDIA AND IT'S CHALLENGES

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In the post independent India, the idea of India as a nation state faced serious challenges as various sub-national, ethnicity movements emerged in various parts of the country. Among them in the early years of independence serious movements were the Dravidian movement and the movement among the Nagas. They wanted an autonomous Nagaland. There have been movements for independent Khalistan and Kashmir. These different kinds of identity movements emerged in the post independence period, and can be divided on the lines of language, region, religion, caste and tribe. Indian constituent states were divided on linguistic lines after independence. However, new demands started coming for creation of more states. Similarly, in many parts of the country tribal movements also occurred at different time periods for separate state/for their autonomy. Among them, the movement in Northeastern India of various ethnic groups and movement of the Gorkhas of West Bengal got considerable attention at the national level.

### Check Your Progress V

- 1) What are the different challenges to Indian nation?

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## 3.5 LET US SUM UP

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We have discussed above some of the points of Indian nationalism during colonial period as well as some issues related to ethnicity and nationalism in the post-colonial period. Nationalism is an important ideology to understand the dynamics of Indian society. In the present day context also to analyse various sub-national, regional, tribal and ethnic movements, it is imperative to understand the nationalist discourse. We have explained some of the major discourses on nationalism provided by different scholars such as by A.R Desai, Partha Chatterjee and Maitreyi Chaudhari on nationalism in India. We also discussed Benedit Anderson's concept of 'Imagined Community' and concept of nation.



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## 3.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) Stalin defined nation as a "historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in community of culture".
- 2) Modern idea of nationalism emerged from the early 19th century Western European combination of three strands:
  - a) Enlightenment
  - b) The French revolutionary idea of the community of equal citizens, and
  - c) The German conception of a people formed by history, tradition and culture.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) Challenges faced in formation of nationhood in India were that India was divided into various principalities and dynasties. Due to its diversity in terms of religion, culture, language, and region it was widely believed and

there was a perception that India cannot form a nation as it did not have a common culture, language or a common history.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) Fill in the Blanks
  - a) feudal
  - b) five
  - c) 1885
  - d) extremist

### Check Your Progress IV

- 1) Nationalism in India was different from the western nationalism as it a spiritual base.

### Check Your Progress V

- 1) The different kinds of challenges that India faced after Independence were that different kinds of identity movements emerged in the post independence period and can be divided on the lines of language, region, religion, caste and tribe.



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# UNIT 4 SUBALTERN CRITIQUE\*

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## Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Concept of Subaltern
  - 4.2.1 Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies
  - 4.2.2 David Hardiman's Study of the Devi Movement
  - 4.2.3 The Dalit as Subaltern: B R Ambedkar
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 References
- 4.5 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the idea of Subaltern in India;
- explain the subaltern viewpoint specially post-colonial subaltern writing of history and Ambedkar's ideas on caste and his anti-caste movement; and
- evaluate Ranajit Guha's and Hardiman's work on the subaltern studies.

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous units on 'Nationalist Discourse', Understanding India and its Major Discourses' we have discussed different perspectives and discussions on Indian society. We explained the

- 1) Indological Discourse : Study of Indian society through its classical texts and literature.
- 2) Colonial Discourse: Study of Indian society by British colonialists (missionaries and administrators) different perspectives on the Nationalist movement given by different scholars.

The present unit will discuss the Subaltern viewpoint and assess critically the Sociology of India and the absence of voice of the marginalised (peasants/tribals/Scheduled Castes') in the major writings of history. Initially we will discuss the concept of subaltern, coined by Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci. The term got much more popular with the development of colonial studies, especially when a new trend in history started in writing the history of the peasants' insurgency or rebellion and tribal uprisings in South Asia. A group of scholars started a new trend, like Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, Sumit Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others. Along with some of these scholars the role of Ambedkar will also be taken up because he worked for the emancipation, upliftment and liberation of the Dalits in India.

## 4.2 THE CONCEPT OF SUBALTERN

The term ‘subaltern’ was coined by Antonio Gramsci. Initially it was widely used to denote inferior rank in army, but nowadays, the term subaltern implies people of inferior rank for his/her various attributes such as economic condition, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, sexual orientation and people are marginalised for such attributes. Thus subaltern perspective is the way to understand society from the below. The people who are marginalized for various reasons in a stratified society produce knowledge and have politics of their own. The dominant historiography or writing of history and study however excludes them from their concerns. Subaltern perspective looks into those who are neglected and marginalized and contrasts it with the elite perspective.

Italian Neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci initiated the concept of subaltern in his *Prison Notebooks* to signify marginalised people. In general, subaltern implies people who are of inferior ranks, but, Gramsci uses the term in much broader sense than its general meaning. By subaltern, he meant all kinds of *non-hegemonic* those who did not occupy powerful and upper class status groups in a class divided society. As such, subaltern implies group or individuals who are outside the power structure. They are made subaltern or subordinated by the dominant hegemonic power structures and they suffer under dominant power relations.

The term subaltern came into popular academic debate after a group of scholars started publishing series of essays and volumes under the title *Subaltern Studies* on the tribal movement and peasant insurgencies and rebellions of colonial India. It is evident that apart from the mainstream nationalist movement the colonial power faced various tribal uprisings and peasants insurgencies in India. Such resistance and movements were ignored by the mainstream historiography or the study of writing histories’.

### Box 4.0: Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Neo-Marxist who redefined Marxism, specially the ideas of traditional Marxism such as the economic determinism. During his higher studies in Turin of Italy, he came into contact with some members of Italian Communist Party. Gramsci became active member of the Italian Socialist and started his journalistic career. He started speaking regularly in workers circles on Marxism, revolution, Paris Commune, French and Italian revolution. In 1919 he started a periodical “The New Order: A Weekly Review of Socialist Culture”, which became popular among the left radicals and revolutionaries. For the next few years, Gramsci devoted most of his time to the development of the factory council movement, and to militant journalism. On November 8, 1926, he was arrested in Rome and, in accordance with a series of “Exceptional Laws” enacted by the fascist-dominated Italian government to solitary confinement in a prison. His *Prison Notebooks* was written by him during his stay in the jail. He died on April 27, 1937.

**Source:** ( <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/intro.html>)

The scholars associated with the subaltern studies group consider that the contributions made by the tribal and the peasants of the colonial period as the subaltern classes remain unacknowledged in history. The study of Indian

nationalist movement, by and large, was undertaken by the dominant class of scholars. In writing the history of Indian nationalism they acknowledged the contribution of the elites only. The subaltern historiography thus was an attempt to restore those historical narratives and reconstruct people's politics and history ignored by the historians. The subaltern perspective holds that the tribal and the peasants are not the object of history rather they make their own history. B. R. Ambedkar, Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman and others are the major advocates of the subaltern perspective. Ambedkar was not only associated with the freedom struggle but also widely protested against the caste based atrocities towards the Dalits. Ranajit Guha and David Hardiman are engaged in restoring various tribal and peasants insurgencies of colonial India which were overlooked by the dominant historiography practices.

### Check Your Progress I

1) What is subaltern perspective?

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2) Who were the major Indian scholars who studied Subaltern perspective?

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#### 4.2.1 Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies

The subaltern studies which emerged in India as a post-colonial theory is about re-writing history of the people. This project is mostly credited to Ranajit Guha and his colleagues such as Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, Sumit Sarkar and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The subaltern historiography i.e. the methods of studying history is concerned with the "history of the subaltern people". The basic premise of the subaltern history was to look at the history from below or the history of the subaltern people as opposed to the elitist perspective in history which ignores their contributions in making of history. Dhanagare (1988) has pointed out that the subaltern historiography approach seeks to restore a balance by highlighting the role of politics of the people as against elite politics played in Indian history.

According to Guha, the subaltern historiography focuses on the peasants and tribal movements during colonial period in India as it has been overlooked by the dominant mainstream elitist historiography. To him, the neglect of the *politics of the people* – and the contributions of the subaltern classes in the nationalist

movement makes Indian history incomplete. Further, according to him, the elitist historiography has the tendency to analyse Indian nationalism and freedom struggle as an idealist venture of the indigenous elites who led people from subjugation to freedom. Such historiography emphasises the role of the individual leaders or of organisations and institutions as the major force during the freedom struggle. Dhanagare (1988) asserts that ‘the followers of this approach argue that elitist historiography, whether of the neo-colonialist or of the neo-nationalist variety, has always overstated the part the elite played in building Indian nationalism but it has failed to acknowledge and less properly interpret the contributions made by the people (masses) on their own, independently’.

Guha (2013) in his article entitled “Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” argues that the historiography of the Indian nationalism was dominated by these elitists who were the colonial and bourgeois nationalist. This type of historical writing gives the impression that the Indian nation and the consciousness of nationalism was an achievement of only the elites. The contributions made by the people in this regard has no relevance. Although they have made their contribution during the freedom struggle ‘independent of the elite’ in making and development of the Indian nationalism. On the other hand, the elitist perspective of history writing portrays their articulation and uprising as the law and order problem. The one sided perspective considers Indian nationalism as the response of the charisma of certain elite leaders. Thus, the subaltern historiography overlooks the *politics of the people*. The subaltern historiographers argue that there was politics of the subaltern classes in the nationalist movement parallel to the politics of the dominant elites. Their politics did not originate from the elite politics and did not depend on their elite politics. For them the subaltern is an autonomous domain.

Thus, subaltern approach in studying the peasants and tribal movements in India is an important milestone because it examines the politics of the people and in opposition to the politics of the elites. Dhanagare (1988) argues for and constructed a twofold division between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’. Both are viewed as two domains of the nationalist movement. He constructs structural dichotomy or the divisions in the structure of society. The politics of the people did not come from the politics of the dominant groups. They are the indigenous people, marginalised groups and classes of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country. They are diverse groups of people who do not share common or uniform ideology but the interesting common feature among them was a notion of resistance to elite domination. The divisions and diversions among them creates the problem of alliance which was not possible among them.

Guha argues that many a times the elitist historiography of Indian nationalism tends to provide a personal account of the “goodness of the native elite who had antagonistic relations with the colonial regime. Although, they had the tendency as collaborationist exploiters and oppressors, with no interest to promote the cause of the people. They were most concerned for power and privilege from the British Raj (Guha, 2013:2). According to Guha, the history of Indian nationalism is a sort of spiritual biography of Indian elites.

The movement, protest, resistance of the peasants, tribal and the marginalised groups during colonial period against the colonial power reflects varied



intensities. Their mobilisation and resistance independent of the elite, emerged from people themselves. The subaltern historiography constructs the binary of the elite and the people. The mobilisation in the elite politics was achieved from above while the mobilisation in the subaltern politics was achieved from below. The subaltern politics and mobilisation was guided more by the traditional institutions like clan, caste, kinship, territoriality, family network, deprivation. The elite politics and mobilisation was governed more by legalistic and constitutional considerations. The subaltern mobilization was more violent, aggressive and spontaneous while the elite mobilisation was cautious, controlled and moderate.

Thus, the subaltern studies project was to create an alternative history, ‘the history of the people’. Guha discusses in *Elementary Aspects of the Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) an interesting account of the peasants’ assertions, peasants consciousness, their mystic visions and religiosity and the social bond of their communities in his study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century peasant’s insurgency in colonial India.

Since he is a Marxist subaltern historian, he interprets the past in order to bring about radical change in historiography and a radical transformation in consciousness. He views that the peasant and tribal insurgents should not be considered as ‘objects’ of history but as ‘makers’ of their own history. They are endowed with a transformative consciousness of their own (Dhanagare, 1988).

### Check Your Progress II

1) What does subaltern historiography overlooks?

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2) What is the main theme of Ranajit Guha’s work on Subaltern perspective?

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3) What are Dhanagare’s views on ‘politics of the people’?

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## 4.2.2 David Hardiman's Study of the Devi Movement

Like Ranajit Guha David Hardiman is also one of the core members of the subaltern historiography movement in India. He focused mainly on the history of South Asia during the colonial period. In his works, he emphasises on the impact of colonial rule on the rural society and their assertions. His analysis of Indian nationalism and independence movement has given new insights in understanding the local power structure and nationalism. He examined the role of local peasants' activities and Adivasi (tribal) assertions during the colonial time especially in western India. He has used ethnographic and archival sources to analyze movements of western India to promote the subaltern studies in India. He has studied the Devi movement which took place in Gujarat during 1922-23. It was Adivasi tribal movement by tribal peasants against the moneylenders, landlords and liquor shop owners. Hardiman in his article titled "Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement" (Subaltern studies Vol. 3) discusses about the assertion of the Adivasis against the liquor dealers for the harmful effects of liquor on the people of their community. The colonial Abkari Act of 1878 banned all local manufacture of liquor and permitted a central distillery at the headquarter town of the district.

The liquor dealers used to pay large amount of money to the government to run the distilleries in addition to the license to sell the liquor in the tribal villages. The distribution of liquor badly affected the lower caste people, especially the Adivasis. Hardiman narrates the adverse effects in his article. In spite of certain control over liquor sellers they continued to have a monopoly on the sale of factory-made alcohol and its distribution amongst the clusters of villages of Adivasis. The excise officials were being bribed for distribution of factory made liquor and illicit distillation (Hardiman 2013: 203-4). The profit made by the money lending and liquor selling by them was huge being and was invested by them in land. The Adivasi community was affected and got addicted to drinking. Their lands were mortgaged or sold to the liquor shop owners.

The Adivasi peasants could gradually realise how the liquor barons in their own villages are exploiting them, although they failed to articulate and protest against such exploitations because of the dominant oppressors like the liquor. But the feeling of exploitation led them to protest among the Adivasi subaltern groups could no longer be suppressed by the dominant liquor barons.

An interesting incident took place in 1922 as a new tradition started in the western part of Gujarat which Hardiman calls as 'Devi' movement. Hardiman found that early in 1922 an epidemic of smallpox broke out in the coastal areas of Gujarat amongst the subaltern fishermen communities. They believed that the smallpox was caused by a goddess and they need to satisfy the goddess to get rid of the epidemic. They started organising ceremonies to satisfy the deity (Shamans by the goddess). It is through Shamans (women being possessed) that the goddess passed the information that she would be satisfied if they gave up eating, fish, meat and drinking liquor, toddy. The people followed her advice. The Devi movement started to be known as *Salahbai*. Slowly the process of shamanism through human beings had spread in the Adivasi villages and they also started practicing Shamanism. The Adivasi peasants used to gather together to listen to the women possessed by *Devi*. To fulfill *Devi's* demands to refrain from drinking liquor and toddy, flesh and meat, along with having regular bath. The effect of

this was that most Adivasis socially boycotted the Parsi liquor shop owners and the landlords, resulting into the Adivasis starting social reforms among themselves. Their assertions resulted in loss of business by the liquor barons, although efforts were made by the liquor barons to bring the Adivasis back to their old habits of drinking liquor but they refused and refrained themselves and their belief in Devi helped them to avoid liquor.

During the mainstream anti-colonial movement, Gandhiji incorporated Adivasis in his movement because of their tendency of assertion and their political voice, observed Hardiman. In South Gujarat, the Adivasis were considered as the passive object of colonial policy. The Gandhian nationalists of Gujarat brought them into the nationalist movement. in alliance with the middle-class. With the help of the local narratives, memories, songs as well as the archival materials, Hardiman examined the role of Adivasis not only in their assertion against the money lenders, liquor barons and the anti-liquor movement. But also in the nationalist movement and social reformation. Independent of outside help, they tried to break the feudal structure of money lenders and the colonial resource base.

Hardiman has undertaken a detailed study of local areas of Kheda district in Gujarat among the peasants of the area. “His ethnographic account reveals that the middle peasantry is relatively radical as compared to poor and landless Adivasi peasants of the villages in the district.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) What did Hardiman’s study of the Devi Movement explain about the Adivasis?

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### 4.2.3 The Dalits as Subaltern : B. R. Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar was one of the most dominant political thinkers of India who critically looked at the caste system in India and its rigidity. He took up the issues of Dalits and Adivasi subalterns. He studied the impact of caste system upon the lower caste people and was best analyzed by him. Though during the early part of Indian national movement, these issues were not taken into consideration. Being born in a lower caste family, Ambedkar devoted his entire life to fight against the caste system which discriminated and marginalized the Dalit subalterns. After being educated in foreign country, he came back to India and started practicing law. In 1920, he formed *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* in Bombay to promote the Dalit interests and to resolve their problems by placing them before the Government. He was not only critical of the caste system but was also instrumental in the movement for eradication of caste discrimination. He also helped the Dalits to claim equal status and equal opportunities with other castes.

Major writings of Ambedkar are :

- 1) The Untouchables, Who are they?
- 2) Who were Sudra?
- 3) States and Minorities
- 4) Emancipation of the Untouchables.
- 5) Annihilation of Caste.

The subaltern group of Dalits is one of the most oppressed and discriminated group of people in Indian society. According to B R Ambedkar, the subaltern communities are those which are discriminated by the dominant castes. In general, the lower caste people are referred to as Dalits as per the Varna system of Hindu society but in the common political understanding and discourse, the Scheduled Caste people are designated as the Dalits. The term Scheduled Caste was first used by the British colonial Government through the Government of India Act 1935. Gandhiji called them Harijans, meaning 'the children of God'. The Dalits are some times referred to by such news as 'exterior castes', outcaste, 'depressed classes', 'Scheduled Caste', 'Harijans', Ex-untouchables, etc.

Ambedkar defines Dalithood as "a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' brahminical ideology". They belong to the lowest strata group in the caste ladder of the Varna scheme of Hindu society, mostly referred as untouchables. Ambedkar was critical of the idea of caste and its related attributes like occupation and hierarchy. He did not consider caste as a natural division but rather a category of social discrimination. He holds the view that the Dalits are the most downtrodden people in Indian society where they are socially, politically and economically backward. They were considered as polluted sections of the society where their touch and even their shadow might pollute the upper castes.

One of the important concepts introduced by Ambedkar related to the caste system, was the idea of '**graded inequality**'. He differentiates between inequality and graded inequality. Inequality can be seen in various forms like skin colour, racial and occupational or work differences. The Black and White color differences are common in the Western societies. These are known as racial differences. The social division due to racial differences is the basis of prejudices, dissension, oppression being done against the race considered to be relatively superior. Similarly, in industrial societies, differences are based on different work positions. These are working classes (Proletariat) and the dominant classes (Bourgeoisie). Their socio-economic conditions and interests are different from each other. They are unequal classes and the conflicting relationship among them is perpetual. At the administrative and professional levels of the industrial societies too there are super-ordinates (administrative and professional elites and bureaucrats) and sub-ordinates (those who work under the super-ordinates). They are also unequal classes where inequality amongst them is based on the nature of productive work in which they are engaged with. Such inequalities based on skin color, race and occupational or work differences are various forms of inequalities but graded inequality is a unique form of inequality which characterises especially Indian society, in terms of Hindu social order where the ascribed status of caste is the basis of differences and inequality. The Hindu

caste system is a graded hierarchical system into four Varnas, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The..... Untouchables are outside the caste system. They are the people graded as the lowest in the caste system. They are not only different from others but also unequal by birth and accordingly their social and economic status is determined.

According to Ambedkar, the caste system in India is a unique form of graded inequality where except Shudras and Untouchables, the rest enjoy privileges according to their hierarchical social status in the traditional social structure. The Brahmins at the top of the ascribed caste hierarchy enjoys the absolute benefits of the caste ideology. Their social and ritual status is the highest but the Shudras and Untouchables are the absolute sufferers in the caste hierarchy. Thus, in the caste system people are divided and arranged in hierarchical orders. This is termed by Ambedkar as the graded inequality. To him, inequality is a social condition where the social status is given it is, predetermined, and achieved by birth into that caste and cannot be changed except by non-ascribed (achievement based) changes. Such a graded system leaves little no or scope or option for change in the ascribed status. They have no option to fight the oppressive reality of the caste system, although changes are taking place but the structural change (change in the caste status) cannot take place unless the caste system is abolished and there is a casteless society. In other forms of social inequality, the working class has the option to fight against the owner of the industry for discriminatory practices but that is not possible in the system of caste because according to the caste ideology caste, the upper caste have the rights and privileges over the lower castes below them in the caste hierarchy. (For reading in this regard, please see *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India* by Ambedkar). Similarly, the rights of the caste categories are graded making the radical change almost impossible.

Ambedkar is quite critical of the working of the caste system and the process of social exclusion and discrimination of the lower caste especially of the Dalits. He was very critical to even Gandhiji's idea of 'Varna and religious institutions having nothing to do with caste. The law of Varna teaches how to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling and it defines not our rights but our duties' (1990:108).

Ambedkar argues that caste disassociates work from interest. It disconnects intelligence from manual labour. It denies the right to cultivate vital interest. It prevents mobilization. The civilized society does need division of labour, but in no civilized society the division of labour is accompanied by the unnatural division of labour. The caste is a hierarchy in which the division of labour is graded one above the other. In no other country the division of labour is accompanied by the gradation of labour. Thus, the graded inequality is the soul of the caste system in India and most importantly all the castes have internalised such divisions. The internalisation of the graded inequality has resulted into failure of bringing about all the castes or a combination of castes for necessary reforms in the system of caste.

Further, according to Ambedkar, the graded inequality excludes the lower castes not only socially but also economically. For example, Mahar caste Dalits do not get work opportunity in the weaving department because they are not supposed to touch the thread due to the factor of purity and pollution. The internalisation of the caste ideology by the lower caste subalterns' makes them feel obliged to



the upper castes or the Masters'. It makes them unaware of their strength which remains unrecognised. They become submissive and their submission is one of the key issue of their subordination.

Thus, Ambedkar becomes the central figure in anti-caste movement in India. He formed *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* to register the protest against the atrocities on the Dalits by the upper castes. The motto of the Sabha was to *educate, organise and agitate*. He holds that until and unless the Dalits rise and fight, they would not achieve their rights. The self awakening is one of the best ways to eliminate the social evils like caste based untouchability etc. He traced the origin of caste system and its ideology of discrimination and said that the sacred Hindu manuscripts like *Manusmriti* and other such writings have legitimised the caste oppression. Such texts set the base for social discrimination based on one's birth. Hence, he advocated destroying such texts. On 25<sup>th</sup> December of 1927 *Manusmriti* was burned by Ambedkar as a step towards a great struggle (Maha-Sangharsha) and make Satyagraha to negate the mythological basis of caste hierarchy and untouchability.

### Check Your Progress IV

1) What are the subaltern communities according to B R Ambedkar?

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2) How did B R Ambedkar define Dalithood?

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3) What is graded Inequality?

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### 4.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we explained the concept of subaltern and the views of scholars like Ranajit Guha, David Hardiram and B.R Ambedkar on the subaltern. The discussion on Adivasi and Dalit subaltern perspectives' gives us the scope to explore the idea of subaltern and to discuss society from the subaltern point of view. The subaltern writing of history is a critique from within and outside. The essay on "Can Subaltern Speak" by Gayatri Spivak is a milestone on the debate on Dalit subaltern. The 'voices from below' cannot be missed and ignored. The debates on the theory and methodology of the subaltern historiography and subaltern studies offer the scope to the historians and other social scientists to give due attention to the assertions by the subaltern and politics by the peasants and other subaltern classes.

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### 4.5 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

#### Check Your Progress I

- 1) The term subaltern implies people of inferior rank for their different attributes such as economic condition, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, sexual orientation. These people are marginalized for such attributes in society. It is a way to understand society from below.

- 2) Major scholars of subaltern perspective are Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, Sumit Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ambedkar and others.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) The subaltern historiography overlooks the politics of the people.
- 2) Guha discusses in “Elementary Aspects of the Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India” (1983) an interesting account of the peasants’ assertions, peasants consciousness, their mystic visions and religiosity and the social bond of their communities in his study of the 19th century peasant’s insurgency in colonial India.
- 3) Dhanagare looks at the divisions in the structure of society broadly. The politics of the people did not come from the politics of the dominant groups. They are the indigenous people, marginalized groups and classes of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country. They are diverse groups of people who do not share common or uniform ideology but the interesting common feature among them was a notion of resistance to elite domination.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) Hardiman explained through local narratives, memories, songs as well as the archival materials, the role of Adivasis not only in their assertion against the money lenders, liquor barons and the anti-liquor movement but also in the nationalist movement and social reformation. Independent of any outside help, they i.e Adivasis tried to break the feudal structure of money lenders and the colonial resource base.

### Check Your Progress IV

- 1) According to B R Ambedkar, the subaltern communities are those which are discriminated by the dominant caste, communities.
- 2) Ambedkar defines Dalithood as “a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ brahminical ideology”.
- 3) Graded inequality is the hierarchical order of various groups where one group is considered as superior to the other. At the same time the superior group is considered as inferior in relation to the group(s) above it. Ambedkar conceptualized the idea of graded inequality to elaborate the caste system in India where shudras are considered as the most inferior group in the caste hierarchy and Brahmins are the most superior group. Vaishys and Kshatriyas are in between where they are superior to the Sudras but traditionally considered as inferior to the Brahmins. Inequality on the basis of birth in all spheres of life, including social and economic.