



# Socio-Economic Conditions of Peasants in Andhra: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract:

Socio-economic also known as social economics is the social science that studies how economic activity affects and is shaped by social processes. In general it analyzes how societies progress, stagnate. Historical writings constantly undergo changes in their format, if not in content, with changing perspectives of people with changing socio-economic conditions of life. As such, it is not the dearth of historians but the historical perspective that is essentially required in research studies. From time immemorial agricultural sector has been constituted as the largest safety net in the Indian Economy. For an understanding of the difficulties of the peasantry it is essential to investigate the economic and social basis of the subsistence pattern that the peasantry had adopted in different situations. The peasants or any group constituting the organisational basis of a productive farming unit could attain a degree of economic security only through an integrative pattern of cultivation and animal husbandry. This paper aims to discuss with socio-economic conditions of peasants.

## Introduction:

The land and the peasantry had been an object of attention by the colonial officials since the early days of colonial rule. Land revenue was the most important source of government's income and the peasants were the people who worked the land and occasionally rose in rebellion against the landlords and the government. The dependence of the colonial government on land revenue necessitated that the peasantry was kept under close scrutiny. Several early works, therefore, focused on the land-revenue systems. However, in the course of time, academically oriented and impartial studies about the land settlement and the peasantry, both for the colonial and pre-colonial periods, began to appear.

The transitional character of rural economy had been subject to economic and political influence.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture is the life line and the principal means of livelihood for one third population in India. It has absorbed the largest workforce of India's economy in both farm and non farming occupations. The glitter of growth has added little sparkle to the lives of many peasants and rural workers. Deprivation, discrimination, and disadvantage dominate the everyday lives of large sections in rural Andhra Pradesh. Village studies highlight features of society that are often overlooked and overshadowed by macro-studies of the economy.

With the geographical peculiarities of the land structure, the socio-economic conditions also base their features on land. Land formed the basis of relational patterns in the society and thus an agrarian structure soon started developing. Possession of land complemented ritual status and brought power.<sup>2</sup> Various tenurial systems evolved for the efficient management and cultivation of land. In the agrarian structure there was a hierarchy based on caste system. Society was divided on the basis of the category of occupations in the system of production.<sup>3</sup> The land owners, chief tenants, sub-tenants and agrestic workers were the different class groups in Andhra. A feudalistic structure was already making its way to the top. The societal division was greatly sanctioned by the caste based hierarchical patterns and customs and religious sanctions.

### **The Caste System:**

India can be regarded as having a hierarchical base within the societal structure. It is conspicuous especially in the caste groups. Caste has got deep roots in Indian social and religious system and it has fixed its base on Hindu philosophy. The exact origin of caste system cannot be traced. The first mention of the caste system and a continuous history of the factors that make up caste can be found in the records of the Indo-Aryan culture. Indo-Aryans are those who belong linguistically to the larger family of peoples pronounced either as Indo-Europeans or as Indo-Germans. They comprise the Anglo-Saxons, the Celts, the Romans, the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Iranians among others.<sup>4</sup> One of the branches of these people who reached India around 2500 B.C is called Indo-Aryan Caste. In the Iranian references, the term Arya stands for possessor or noble.<sup>5</sup>

According to H.W Bailey, the Arya are the party of the poets, and certainly it is a laudatory epithet.<sup>6</sup> From all this it may be inferred that the leaders of the Rig Vedic people or Gods who are extolled in the hymns as Arya were either possessors of wealth or noble or both. Louis Dumont considers hierarchy derived from the opposition of the pure and the impure as the *differentia specifica* of caste as evident by the tide of his renowned book on the subject.<sup>7</sup> Celestine Bougle has made a precise definition of caste epitomising its major features into three salience's, occupational specialisation on a hereditary basis, hierarchical status gradation, and repulsion, that is, separation of each social group from others through commensally and connubial restrictions.<sup>8</sup>

### **Stratification on the Basis of Caste:**

Under the caste system status is hereditary. It is based on birth; it is purely an ascribed status. Once such positions are assigned, they cannot advance and improve their social status in any way. Hence, caste as a major type of social stratification does not facilitate vertical social mobility. Impact of stratification due to caste: derogatory treatment to some castes, only certain sections had a chance to progress, low self esteem, and division in society made it easier for foreigners to attack, loss of human resources. There are fair indications that peasant society had a large section of Sudras in them. It goes without saying that a large section of the Vaisyas continued tilling the land as before and was part of the peasant society.

Thus peasant society had members from all the four castes, though their certainly was an inside stratification, some being landlords and having large landed estates, some being peasant proprietors, some being share-croppers and some working as tenants and labourers only. Thus the fact of Brahmins standing at the top of society was well established and naturally so because the whole social order was shaped as per Brahmanical texts. No wonder they had the leadership of the contemporary peasant society. Peasant society by its very nature was bound to be a traditional society. Hence it was all the easier for the literate and learned Brahmin members to acquire eminence and influence the social behaviour of the peasants.

The most distinctive, as well as the most clear-cut, specialization occurs in Hindu India, where a typical village may contain as many as 2,500 people. The professional specialties are pottery manufacturing, stone working, barbering, trading, weaving, laundering, and herding. All of these occupations are carried on by separate castes, to which should be added the twice-born caste, the Brahmin, or wise-man priest, though this is more of a status than an occupation. The specialized services of the various castes often are rendered without any immediate payment or return service. The occupational castes all have an obligation to provide their services. The full-time peasant agriculturalist, for example, expects a new plow or hoe from the carpenter, a pot from the potter, haircuts from the barber, and so on. After the semi-annual harvest the peasant distributes appropriate shares of produce to those who have served him.

The caste system of occupations largely determines the status of individuals, but there are ways to attain higher status by acquiring wealth or political office. A wealthy landowner of low caste will continue to observe all the traditional attitudes of deference to those of higher caste; yet his opinion may be important and his power considerable in other than direct interpersonal dealings. And, of course, high and low status may be earned within a given caste depending on individual skill and personality. Many Indian peasant villages are exogamous (marrying outside), which results in ties among several villages as a consequence of giving and receiving wives. In such cases, every person participates in a social network outside his village to a greater extent than he associates with persons of other castes within his own village.

These regional relationships are the means by which a common culture is diffused over a wide area. Hindu peasant villages are less alike the farther they are from each other, yet vast areas of rural India are remarkably homogeneous in culture. Hindu peasant tended toward economic self-sufficiency in its local specialized occupations and several respects in village. One characteristic of the peasant economy is that the production unit is normally the family. But this does not mean that families are all the same size. Mainly, technical and economic requirements tend to govern the size of the family, which ranges from large three-generational extended families down to the nuclear unit of one set of parents and their unmarried children. Inheritance patterns tend to reflect the requirements of the agricultural operation. Whether the land is split equally among the heirs or passed on as a single unit (commonly through the eldest son) depends on whether farming requires large holdings or whether a small, intensively farmed area is sufficient. In some historical instances, the ecological determinant of the size of holdings has been contravened by ideology or law.

### **Stratification on the Basis of Class:**

Class is an open system and this is a typical modern type of stratification system that tends to be universal in nature. The class based stratification system group people who hold the same economic situations such as occupation, income and ownership of wealth together. Those who are better off are usually those who enjoy more privileges such as higher educational level, status and lifestyle, leisure activities and power. The diagram below represents a typical class system. Under this system vertical mobility is absolutely free. Movement from one status to another has no barrier. Status is based on achievement. It is determined by the talents, wealth, money, intelligence, power, education, income, etc. of a person. There is no inheritance of parental status. Impact of stratification due to class divides society into haves and have nots, could lead to crime, poor health, illiteracy, class struggle, benefits of progress limited to few, low income. American economist Galbraith argued that people are poor when their incomes fall remarkably below those of the community, even if they are sufficient for their survival. Besides all these they face marginal living and have degraded lifestyles. In this sense, the poor are thus devoid of all opportunities and are said to be an underclass.

### **Peasant and Caste or Class Interface:**

As a form of stratification, the caste is peculiar to the Indian society. It may be called as an extreme form of closed class system. The status of individuals in the social hierarchy is determined by birth. The caste system is also found in other parts of the world, but not in a complete form as it is evinced in India. It is believed that there are about 3,000 castes in India. From this one can well imagine the extent of caste diversity in India. Every society classifies its population into different segments on the basis of occupation, wealth or education, which are considered predominant characteristics of class. Persons belonging to particular segment of society are pronounced as a separate class. They formulate their own values and aspirations for the efficient functioning of their community. Stronger the class consciousness, greater are the chances of social conflicts. In India which is also a closed society, the

class consciousness has been intensified by the pace of social and economic change and this has threatened the old social order.

Though, the peasant proprietors in Andhra did not seem to have been a very flourishing and affluent class. Yet in the many regions petty land holders, prosperous tenants, shop owners and middle-sized commercial entrepreneurs worked for the congress in this time. There had been very close links between the peasant organizations and the Indian National Congress. The Indian National Congress leadership however was dominated by the professional class and intelligentsia, but the leadership at grass root level and from the urban centres, who looked to the central leadership for guidance, hailed from the class of what may loosely be called middle gentry and tenantry. Thus peasants are socially and economically marginalised, culturally subjugated and politically disempowered social groups who are attached to land to eke out a subsistence living.<sup>9</sup>

### **Economic Conditions of Peasantry:**

The economic life of Indian peoples in general, was conditioned by geographical, physical and climatic factors on the one hand and by social organisations, age old customs and religious faiths on the other. Through the ages the basic, ways of living were stabilised into fixed economic systems which, more or less, maintained continuity from ancient to medieval times. Economic conditions also have presented certain paradoxical features at almost all periods of history. India was proverbially a rich country, full of resources and wealth, yet famines and scarcities were not unusual phenomena. Within the vast dimensions of the land there could be a surplus of food at one place and extreme scarcity at another. Such contradictory features were not unnatural in the days when modern means of transportation did not exist. The so-called medievalism or traditionalism in Indian economic ways may be said as due to the time factor itself. The transition from a medieval to modern economy was a worldwide phenomenon. Like other countries, Indian economy was also transformed. The colonial rule in India coincided with the general world economic transition. The general economic conditions of the Andhra caused acute distress among the poor sections of the population, fostered discontent among the middle classes, especially the educated and created political unrest among the people by and large.

That the Indian people especially the agriculturists were illiterate and were not open to learning new methods of agriculture was an impression that the foreigners had formed in their mind. They believed that the Indian agriculturists blindly followed their traditional methods of agriculture industry and business and were averse to new innovations. This feeling was not only common in India and outside among the foreigners but also among the English educated Indian elite. Therefore, it may be argued that the so-called traditional and unscientific attitude of Indian ryot had little difference with the progressive scientific English ryots (at least up to the 1920s).



## The System of Bonded Labour or Slavery:

During the early historical period there existed slavery in Andhra and the greater part of the labourers were slaves. Thus land became gradually the subject of distinct properties the labourer was the personal slave of the occupier of the soil. The slave was liable to be sold and mortgaged independently. Caste superiority was at its acme in the agrarian relationship. It is possible to behold, three distinct interpretations from the available literature on the history of land tenure. They are the caste based, Brahmin centered and the upper caste dominated land system existed in the pre-British period in this area. The condition became such that the slaves and the downtrodden people could no longer be kept under control unless some sort of privilege was granted to them.<sup>10</sup>

There were a lot of references to slavery in Arthashastra,<sup>11</sup> a contemporary work of Megasthenes which neglected to mention the system of slavery. Kautilya has devoted a full chapter to slave where he has discussed at length their socio-economic status in the society. It is evident that serfs, slaves and landless labours for the king were provided food and clothes in lieu of wages.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes state was forced to take recourse to slave labour to reclaim new land for the imperial farm and it existed purely in relation to economic factors as find the labour engaged in all type of productive work.<sup>13</sup>

The socio-economic aspect of feudalism in India was intimately connected with the transformation of the Sudras, whole were common helots of the three higher Varnas. Probably they were provided the waste and undeveloped land, because old peasants would not like to shift from settled areas, or aboriginal cultivators were enrolled as Sudras in the Brahmanical social organisation. They were called peasants. The Sudras are appeared as farmers. Slaves and artisans who were generally belonged to lower castes were subjected to forced labour and subsequently it became well recognised phenomenon.

### Conditions of Peasants in Andhra:

The agricultural classes comprising land owners tenants and agricultural labour. There were inamdars who were enjoying entire villages on petty holdings. Another class of land owners who have redeemed the land tax by making a lump payment to the Government. The ryotwari pattadars are peasant proprietors form another class. Consequent to the construction of anicuts on the rivers Godavari and Krishna there was a marked growth, in the agricultural economy. Agricultural labour had increased from 14.5% to 21.4%. It is observed that this is due to the concentration of land ownership and the large scale migration of agricultural labourers. The Brahmin land owners failing in agriculture sold their lands and took new avenues in education and other professions.

The other peasantry classes like the Kammas, Reddys, Naidus etc. began to concentrate on the agricultural productivity by employing labourers from their castes of the peasants or their relations. The growth in commercial crops cultivation also contributed to the position of middle class. Thus this class of peasantry who took to the western education provided the support to the local elite which initially

comprised of Brahmin class. Despite heavy taxation, inefficient system of water management and lack of adequate transport facilities, there was surplus in agriculture. This contributed to the improvement in transport and urbanisation.

The phenomenon of land transfer and the concentration of land expressed in terms of caste, land were rapidly passing out from Brahmins, artisan sections and the agricultural labour castes. Brahmins have almost lost their lands because: (a) traditionally they are averse to the menial and physical work such as ploughing and other works related to cultivation, (b) incurred heavy expenses for social ceremonies, to maintain their leisurely lives, and to finance the education of their children, and (c) many of them have migrated to towns mostly getting employment in the imperial administration and sold their lands to the rich ryots in the Village.

The rich ryots lent money on inam lands, taking them on long leases. The inamdars, being Brahmins, did not cultivate their land themselves, while the ryots have the means enough to carry cultivation, and also buy the lands if the need arises. Among the Sudra castes such as Reddis, Kammars, Kapus, etc., the well-off sections profited out of rise in the prices of agricultural produce, money lending and trade in commercial crops. Sayana observes that the Reddis and the Telugas are also losing lands in the districts where their population is sparse, while the Reddis in Nellore district are acquiring more and more land. The Kammars are seen more and more enterprising in acquisition of land and of late in business enterprise. Kshatriyas are not usually found as landowning community except in some villages in few taluks of the West and East Godavari districts.<sup>14</sup> He also states that the carpenters and smiths were losing their lands, while the weaver, barber and oil-crusher were able to hold what they own.

Commercialisation of agriculture further enhanced the speed of transfer of ownership of land thereby increasing the number of landless labourers. It also brought in a large number of merchants, traders and middlemen who further exploited the situation. The peasant now depended on them to sell their produce during harvest time. Because the peasants now shifted to commercial crops, food grain production went down. So, less food stock led to famines. It was therefore not surprising that the peasants revolted. The adverse impact of the British rule on the political, economic and social spheres resulted in sharp reaction of the peasants against the foreigners. This led to a series of the anti-British movements throughout the country as well as Andhra. Peasants and tribes rebelled against exploitative rulers.

The economic decline of peasantry and artisans were reflected in major and numerous minor famines. All these factors only helped to spread anti-British feeling which ultimately culminated in their revolts. The British were not very sensitive to the feelings of the peasants they ruled ruthlessly. Hence, reforms introduced by them to put an end to some social customs made the people believe that the Government wanted them to be converted to Christianity. As a result, the English East India Company's rule in India witnessed a large number of uprisings and rebellions.

The pre-colonial India where forest tracts and nomadism predominated was replaced by a land of sedentary agriculture. The society of peasants and petty-money lenders formed the lynchpin of the colonial state. It provided a better clientele for Lancashire cotton than the nomads and tribals. The introduction of cotton, indigo, sugar cultivation, jute production and tea and coffee plantations led to increased demand for agricultural labour. The distinctions among the peasantry of settled agriculture areas which were based on their traditional status and functions were now made on the basis of proprietorship of land and wealth. The traditional village community was divided into eminent lineage aristocracy (zamindars) and other rich peasants who had earlier enjoyed considerable power in the rural areas. However in the colonial period the power of the eminent groups in the village community was eroded. The Colonial power ended what it called slavery and the practice of making slaves during war was also put down.

The low caste persons who had earlier been deprived of holding land were becoming poor peasants. In Andhra the abolition of customary law against the holding of land by the low castes adversely affected the availability of labour. However at times pressure of land revenue and agriculture depression forced the peasants to become landless labourers. In South India the military tenures were abolished and replaced by cash revenue and cash rent. The specialist weavers also took to agriculture. Rural landless wage labour's bargaining power declined due to colonial state's discouragement to internal migration. There was no improvement in the rural standards of living. The village service community declined and this resulted in the emergence of cash earning landless field labourers. There was increase in the percentage of cultivating peasants and landless agriculture workers.

### **Conclusion:**

The caste system has been a handy instrument of oppression that the appropriating classes were equipped with a unique system exclusive to the Indian society which has down the ages emerged as a mechanism of extra economic coercion. The caste tradition in India has it that the three upper castes are not to associate directly with cultivation, griming their hands as it would involve. With this kind of caste restrictions, they engaged people from lower castes and non-Hindu communities. The actual tillers of the land were from low castes and backward communities.



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