

Module name/ title: From Class to Identity Politics

Paper: Media and Margins

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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Media and Communication Studies
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Pre-requisites	
Objectives	
Keywords	

1. Introduction

In this module you will learn about the development of the concept of 'Class' and 'Identity Politics' in social sciences. Social class is regarded as one of the very important forms of social stratification. In a class system, status plays an important role. It is never 'ascribed' like caste. One's status is determined by possession of the resources or achievements. In contemporary times, there are various class divisions in developed world such as upper class, middle class, working class, elite class, under class, etc. which depict the presence of class differences in a society.

Another concept which has been for long not under the lens of the mainstream western sociology is identity. There were very few theorists who wrote on identity such as G. H. Mead and C. H. Cooley. It is interesting to note that in South Asia the concept of identity has gradually taken up the centre stage leading to the idea of identity politics in contemporary world.

2. Learning Outcome

You will learn about the concept of class and its different theoretical perspectives. It will also be helpful in understanding the idea of identity and identity politics and how class and identity politics are interrelated in today's world. This module will also help to develop a better understanding of class and identity politics.

3. Understanding Class

Social stratification describes inequalities between individuals and groups within societies. Social stratification can be defined as the structured inequalities between different groups of people. Societies are seen to be consisting of 'strata' in a hierarchical position with more favoured at the top and less favoured at the bottom of the 'strata'. (Giddens & Sutton 2013: 480-481).

There are three forms of social stratification which can be distinguished such as slavery, caste and class. A social class is a group of people who share similar level of economic resources which in turn strongly influences their patterns of lifestyle. Class differs from other forms of social stratification in four main respects:

- a. *Class systems are fluid:* Classes are not established by legal or religious provisions. The boundaries between classes are indefinite.
- b. *Class positions are in some parts achieved:* An individual's class is not ascribed like it is in Caste. Social mobility is more common here than in other forms.
- c. *Class is economically based:* Classes are created in economic differences between groups of individuals i.e. inequalities in the possession of material resources.
- d. *Class systems are large scale and impersonal:* Class operates through large-scale impersonal associations. Class difference occurs in inequalities of pay and working conditions whereas in other forms of social stratifications, inequalities are expressed in personal relationships of duty or obligation (Giddens & Sutton 2013: 485).

In the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (1968), three components of Social Class are defined:

- a. "Classes are *bounded*, which means that one can write a rule for each class that tells whether a particular individual is to be included or excluded from the membership in it.
- b. Classes are *ordered* which means that the bounded classes can be arranged into a single hierarchy.
- c. Classes are *mutually exclusive* which means that the social class membership is ambiguous, that is, membership in any one class precludes simultaneous membership in any other class" (Sills 1968: 316).

4. Theorizing Social Class:

In terms of theories related to social class, the theories developed by Karl Marx and Max Weber form the basis of most sociological analyses of class and stratification.

Karl Marx's theory of class:

Marx believed that Western society had developed through four main stages- primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and capitalist society. And every stage has two classes – the ruling class and the subject class – except in primitive communism in which societies were based on socialist mode of production. The ruling class owns and controls the means of production (capital, land, labour power, machineries, etc.) and the subject class provides the labour power required for production. The ruling class exploits and oppresses the subject class where the latter class has very little or no power to oppose. The ruling class justifies and projects their class domination thus projecting a distorted picture of reality (Holborn & Haralambos, 2014).

Marx stated about 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' where a 'class in itself' is a social group of people whose members share a common relationship to the forces of production while class for itself happens when the same group of people strive to look out for their own interest. It was said that when a 'class in itself' becomes a 'class for itself', a revolutionary class consciousness emerges amongst the workers as they realize that it is only through collective action that they can overthrow the ruling class. Only when the means of production are communally owned, the classes will disappear, thereby bringing an end to the exploitation and oppression of some by others. This was Marx's idea of utopia where capitalism is replaced by communist society, where there will be no class distinctions (Holborn & Haralambos, 2014).

Max Weber's theory of class:

According to Weber, society is characterized by conflicts over power and resources. But Weber believed that economy is not the only way to understand social stratification in society. There are two other aspects which are important in understanding social stratification i.e. status and party.

Weber defined class as a group of individuals who share a similar position in the market economy and receive similar economic rewards. According to him, a person's

'class situation' is basically his 'market situation'. Weber argued that individual's *market position* strongly influences their life chances (Haralambos & Heald, 2011). "According to Weber, class divisions derive not just from ownership or lack of ownership of means of production, but from economic differences that have nothing directly to do with property. These include the skills and credentials, or qualifications, which affect the types of work that people are able to obtain" (Giddens & Sutton, 2013: 486).

While class forms one possible basis for group formation, collective action and the acquisition of political power, Weber argues that there are other bases such as status and party. Status group refers to a group made up of "individuals who are awarded similar amount of social honour and therefore share the same status situation. They share a similar lifestyle, identify themselves with the status group they belong to, and often place restrictions on the ways in which outsiders may interact with them" (Haralambos & Heald, 2011: 46).

Weber defined parties as groups that are concerned with influencing policies and making decisions in the interests of their membership. In Weber's words, parties are concerned with 'the accusation of social "power"'. Parties often represent the interests of classes or status groups but not necessarily, as parties can divide and cut across both classes and status groups (ibid).

Weber's analysis of classes, status groups and parties suggest that no single theory can explain the relationship. The interplay of the class status and party in the formation of social groups is complex and must be studied in particular societies and at particular time periods (ibid).

5. The concept of Middle Class:

In the pre-colonial history, the middle class comprised of the merchant, the artisan and the landed aristocracy. In the colonial period, the middle classes transformed and included the businessmen, entrepreneurs, industrialists, educated groups, professionals, etc. After independence, the structure of middle class underwent a considerable change in terms of their size, functions and role due to the nature of the Indian state (Sharma, 2011: 215).

Satish Deshpande (2003) gave out three hypothetical definitions of middle-class which are theoretical definitions and are expected to highlight the crucial aspects of post-colonial societies.

1. Middle class is a class that articulates the hegemony of the ruling bloc. It both expresses the hegemony by translating the relations of domination into the language of legitimation and mediates the relationship between classes within the ruling bloc, as well as between this bloc and other classes.
2. Middle class is most dependent on cultural capital and on the mechanisms for the reproduction of such capital. For a middle class, cultural capital may consist of particular type of identities such as caste, community or region and competences such as educational credentials, linguistic and other social skills.
3. As a differentiated class, middle class specializes in the production and dissemination of ideologies. The elite fraction specializes in the production of ideologies and its mass fraction engages in the exemplary consumption of these ideologies investing them with social legitimacy.

Elites:

Elite was originally the description of someone elected or formally chosen. From mid 18th century but more commonly from early 19th century, it is expressed mainly as social distinction by rank, but it was also available for distinction within a group. “Its emergence in a more specific modern sense is related to conscious arguments about class. This has two main elements: first, the sense that there has been a breakdown in old ways of distinguishing those best fitted to govern or exercise influence by rank or heredity, and a failure to find new ways of distinguishing such persons by formal (parliamentary or democratic) elections; secondly, in response to socialist arguments about rule by classes, or about politics as conflict between classes, the argument that the effective formations of government and influence are not classes but elites” (Williams 1976: 113).

6. Understanding Identity Politics

“With the rise of new social movement identity itself became a political issue” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013: 762). The term identity politics was used for the first time in 1979 by Anspach to refer to “the activism by people with disabilities to transform both self and societal conceptions of people with disabilities” (Bernstein, 2005: 47). “By mid-1990s, references to identity politics as violent ethnic conflict (Meznaric, 1993), and nationalism more generally (Alund 1995), emerged” (ibid: 48).

Identity refers to both the identity of the individual and the collective. It has been studied in socio-psychological as well as in politico-sociological manner. Mead and Cooley approached identity in a socio-psychological rather than in politico-sociological one. In their discussions on the subject, a crucial point was made i.e., the significance of ‘others’ is important in the formation of an individual’s self-identity. However, different scholars pointed out that it is not sufficient for an individual or a collectivity to merely assert an identity. Jodhka (2001) mentioned that it was during seventies and eighties, with the rise of ‘new’ social movement, including those by women and subordinate ethnicities, that the question of ‘identity’ acquired a political status in the western societies and academia. Identity assertions often contest the space, including public, private, political, social, occupied by powerful sections of some established/dominant communities which lead to conflict situations in the society. Conflicts channelized by such politics have become a worldwide phenomenon. In our own region too, identity based conflicts have taken their toll (Baruah, 2017).

It was in the seventies that the West experienced the ‘ethnic revival’ as called by Anthony D. Smith (1981), while it was in the eighties that identity and ethnicity demanded the centre stage in Indian politics. It was the crisis experienced in the northeastern state of Assam and northwestern state of Punjab simultaneously during the two most significant political movements, which made identity politics visible in India. The mobilization of Dalits acquiring the status of an autonomous movement around the same time, the implementation of the Mandal Commission report on caste-based reservation for OBCs in 1990s, and the widespread mobilization for and against it, brought the issues of caste again in the forefront of Indian politics (Jodhka, 2001).

Jodhka mentions that all these movements had one thing in common. The issue raised by them could not be understood or dealt with in the old language of development economics, a language through which the needs and problems of the people had so far been articulated. The core issues raised in all these articulations were those of identity and culture (ibid). Baruah (2017) argues that identity politics almost invariably develops a tendency to judge the cultures of other groups by standards defined by one's own culture. It prompts people to perceive one's own way of life as superior to others and, therefore, develops a tendency of disapproving other's cultures.

Jenkins maintains that "identity can only be understood as a process. One's social identity (or identities) is [are] never a final settled matter" (Jenkins, 1996 as cited in Jodhka, 2001). Jodhka explains two different approaches through which identity movements in India can be looked at. The first position states cultural identity 'in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (Hall, 1990: 223 cited in Jodhka, 2001). It was within this framework that most identity movements would articulate their politics in such a 'primordial perspective'. The second position is 'open ended view of culture' that approaches community identities as processes of what Appadurai calls, 'conscious mobilization of cultural differences' (Appadurai, 1997: 15 as cited in Jodhka, 2001). The second notion of identity allows looking at identity movements as open-ended phenomena having context specific politics but also helps to approach culture with a critical and historical perspective.

7. Middle Class and Identity Politics in India:

In India, the contemporary importance of middle class and its post-colonial trajectory were shaped by its colonial role. Indian nationalism was initially a creation of this class which explains the role of middle class in nationalist movement. The colonial power had to educate and westernize middle class of the country so that it could supply the subaltern bureaucracy needed to administer the vast colony. At the same time, this class was not allowed to have the full privilege of being the educated and westernized one and was prevented at some point of time. It is these dissatisfied elites who helped give birth to the idea of nation and to a nationalist movement (Anderson, 1991 cited in Deshpande, 2003). The leaders of the nationalist movement who were known as the middle class were mostly members of the social elite who had taken to the new urban professions, particularly law. As is known to all, middle class professionals (lawyers) dominated the middle and upper level leadership of the Indian National Congress (Misra, 1991 cited in Deshpande, 2003). It was only during the post-independence phase of Indian history that the middle class in contemporary sense emerged, consisting of people who were not substantial property owners and who were dependent on educational and cultural capital and the professional careers (ibid).

After Independence, this middle class acquired a strong hold over the state apparatus and was raised to a position of an indispensable member of the ruling bloc of country. As this middle class helped to create and maintain a 'native' public sphere in the colony (Chatterjee, 1994 cited in Deshpande, 2003), it carried over this role into the post-colonial period (Deshpande, 2003).

Deshpande explains that by the late nineteenth century, the Western role model of the middle class was ready for export and adaptation. And the members of the

emergent Indian middle class i.e. urban professionals, white collar workers in government and in industries and intelligentsia self-consciously evoked this model based on moral privileging of the middle class (ibid).

During colonial period, the middle class in India took the form of an ethical imperative to launch and manage the nationalist revival in the present familiar strategy: modernizing by imitating the West in the 'outer/ material' sphere, while at the same time reinventing a classicized tradition protected from the Western contamination in the 'inner/spiritual' sphere (Chatterjee, 1986 cited in Deshpande, 2003). The post independence form of this moral privileging took the form of 'development'. Middle class saw itself as continuing the nationalist project by managing the developmental process on behalf of the nation (Deshpande, 2003).

8. Conclusion:

Identity has become an important phenomenon in the modern politics. It refers to both the identity of the individual and the collective. The identification of members of a group is done on the basis of sharing common attributes such as language, gender, religion, culture, ethnicity, etc. which indicates the existence or formation of identity. Identity politics gained legitimacy in 1970s and 1980s. Class refers to a group of people who share similar level of economic resources which in turn strongly influence the patterns of lifestyle they lead. In India, during the colonial rule, educated middle class emerged as a result of the changes introduced by the colonial administration. Introduction of western education and the capitalist path of development adopted by the state of India had led to the rise of the western educated middle class. In contemporary India, this class has established hegemony. The middle class plays an important role in articulating the larger demands of a group which it represents dwelling within the range of identity politics.