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Q2(c)

What, according to Andre Beteille, are the bases of agrarian class structure in India? Analyse

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Caste System

Caste System: Perspectives (G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille); Features of caste system; Untouchability - forms and perspectives.

Core demand of the question

- State Beteille's bases of agrarian class in the Tanjore analysis
- Relate ownership, control and use of land to class; keep caste and power as distinct but interacting dimensions
- Analyse how far the scheme still works

Revision summary

Beteille based agrarian class on land property and labour, not on caste rank.

Owners, tenants and agricultural labourers are the main classes in his Tanjore study.

Caste, class and power are three interacting dimensions.

Ownership, control and labour remain the operational bases.

Corporate farming, reverse tenancy and public works modify the actors without cancelling the scheme.

Introduction

André Beteille studied a Tanjore village as a system of **caste, class and power**. Agrarian class, for him, is not another name for jati. It is built on **property in land**: who owns, who controls tenancy and who sells labour. Those bases organise the village economy. Caste and panchayat power overlap them without being the same thing.

Body

Land as the class base

Beteille distinguished landowners, tenants and agricultural labourers as the principal **agrarian classes**, with finer grades of absentee owner, cultivating owner, sharecropper and attached labour. The base is **rights in land and the product**, not ritual rank. A Brahmin landowner and a non-Brahmin landowner can sit in the same class; a poor Brahmin may not. This was a deliberate break from treating the village as only a caste map, and from a crude Marxism that ignored status.

- **Class rests on three practical bases: ownership** (title and the power to alienate), **control** (who decides cropping, credit and tenancy), and **labour** (who must sell work to eat). Green Revolution machinery, reverse tenancy and peri-urban sale have shuffled these bases, but they are still Beteille's questions.

Caste and power as related structures

In **Caste, Class and Power**, the three dimensions can diverge. Non-Brahmin owners could rise in the class map while Brahmins kept ritual status. Panchayat and party power could shift toward numerically strong cultivating groups. Analysis means using the three together: agrarian class explains surplus and dependence; caste explains marriage and honour; power explains who commands the local state.

What 'bases' still miss

Béteille wrote before contract farming, MNREGA, and widespread female agricultural labour statistics. The bases still work if we ask who commands machines, warehouses and mandi credit. A commission agent can control the crop without owning the plot. A woman who weeds all season without her name on the patta is in the labour class even when the household is recorded as a small owner. Caste still sorts gangs. The analysis is therefore: **land rights as the class base**, with caste and power as overlapping structures, updated for contractors and the welfare state.

Flow diagram

Land ownership -> Agrarian class
Control of tenancy -> Agrarian class
Sale of labour -> Agrarian class
Caste status -> Agrarian class
Local power -> Agrarian class

Conclusion

For Béteille, agrarian class structure rests on ownership, control and use of land, visible as owners, tenants and labourers. Caste and power interact with that structure but are not its definition. The triad still analyses rural India if we add new controllers of land and labour.

Facts & figures

Caste, Class and Power

Béteille's 1965 Tanjore study separating status, property and political power.

Agrarian classes

Landowners, tenants and labourers as property-based categories.

Divergence

Ritual rank and land class need not coincide; that is central to his analysis.