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Q2(b)

'Agrarian class structure has been undergoing changes due to modern forces.' Critically examine

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Industrialization and Urbanisation in India

Industrialization and Urbanisation in India: Evolution of modern industry in India; Growth of urban settlements in India; Working class: structure, growth, class mobilization; Informal sector, child labour; Slums and deprivation in urban areas.

Core demand of the question

- Recall classical pictures of agrarian classes (Thorner, Desai, Dhanagare)
- **Show modern forces:** land reform, **Green Revolution**, tenancy, markets, MGNREGA, migration, corporate farming
- Argue what has changed and what caste-class overlap remains
- **Be critical:** not a linear shift from feudal to capitalist farmers everywhere

Revision summary

Thorner's malik-kisan-mazdoor map still orients agrarian class, with caste as the usual skin.

Land reform thinned intermediaries unevenly; ceilings and tenancy left loopholes.

Green Revolution and commercial farming produced capitalist farmers and a larger hired workforce.

MGNREGA, migration and peri-urban land markets further split classes.

Change is real but not a uniform national shift from feudalism to pure agrarian capitalism.

Introduction

Agrarian class structure in India was never a simple two-class war. **Daniel Thorner** spoke of malik, kisan and mazdoor. **A. R. Desai** and **D. N. Dhanagare** read peasant movements through class fractions. Modern forces-legislation, technology, markets and welfare-have **rearranged** those fractions without wiping out caste or landlord power everywhere.

Body**The older map**

Zamindari, ryotwari and mahalwari produced different mixes of rent, revenue and labour. After zamindari abolition, intermediaries were legally thinned, but **ceiling evasion, benami, and tenancy insecurity** left a class of surplus-appropriators. In wet rice and canal regions, a **rich peasant / capitalist farmer** layer grew. In dry regions, smallholders and labourers remained exposed. **Kathleen Gough, Bêteille** and village ethnography showed class sitting on caste: landowning dominant castes, tenant middle groups, and Dalit labour.

Modern forces

Land reform was regionally uneven (Kerala and West Bengal versus Bihar's delayed theatre). The **Green Revolution** (Punjab, Haryana, west UP, parts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra) differentiated a tractor-and-tube-well class from hired labour, raised yields, and later fed a crisis of water, debt and surplus youth. **Commercialisation** and **contract farming** insert companies into cane, poultry and vegetables. **Reverse tenancy** appears where small owners lease to machine-owning farmers. **MGNREGA** and PDS shift the bargaining power of labour, especially women, without creating a full rural proletariat in **Marx's** sense. **Migration**-circular, Gulf, factory-turns the village into a labour-exporting household. Corporate land acquisition and peri-urban real estate create a **rentier** layer of non-cultivating owners.

Caste still organises who owns the tubewell and who does the weeding. **Jats, Reddys, Patidars, Vokkaligas** illustrate agrarian class as status group. Farmer protests mix price politics with that status. At the bottom, landless Dalit and Adivasi labour remain the most proletarianised, now also in brick kilns and construction. Women do a large share of field work yet rarely hold title, so class maps are **gender-blind** unless we name unpaid family labour.

APMC markets, corporate retail, and the brief **farm laws** conflict showed that "modern forces" include the state as price-maker, not only the tractor. Dairy cooperatives and contract poultry create petty commodity producers who look independent and remain tied to companies. **NITI** and insurance schemes treat the farmer as an entrepreneur; village ethnography still finds debt, honour, and jati in the same ledger.

- **The critical point:** modern forces have **pluralised** agrarian classes-petty commodity producers, capitalist farmers, absentee landlords, migrant labour-rather than delivering one national kulak versus one national labourer.

Flow diagram

Thorner malik kisan mazdoor -> Green Revolution and markets
 Green Revolution and markets -> Capitalist farmer / reverse tenancy
 Green Revolution and markets -> Migrant and MGNREGA labour
 Green Revolution and markets -> Non-cultivating rentiers

Conclusion

Agrarian class structure is changing under law, technology, markets and migration, but it is still a caste-inflected, regionally split formation. Thorner's three terms remain a useful skeleton; the flesh is now **Green Revolution** capital, welfare wages, and non-cultivating owners.

Facts & figures

Daniel Thorner

Malik (proprietor), kisan (working peasant), mazdoor (labourer) as the working class vocabulary of rural India.

Green Revolution

HYV seeds, irrigation and chemicals from the 1960s; strong in Punjab-Haryana-west UP; raised output and class polarisation.

MGNREGA 2005

Rights-based rural wage work that slightly tightens the labour market without ending agrarian inequality.

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