Introduction

Backwardness results from a history of exploitation and is also the unifying thread in this thesis. This research is mainly concerned with backwardness, which prevails in agrarian systems in this country, and the historical and structural reasons which lead to such a scenario. The term backwardness, in the Indian context throws up a multiplicity of meanings. Backwardness could imply, as it does in administrative terms, remote/underdeveloped areas. In administrative lexicon, *backward districts* are identified on the basis of some criterion\(^1\) (especially demographic criterion). This identification process then leads to planning for development of these backward areas.

Alternatively, *Backward Classes* Commissions identify backward social groups on the basis of a set of criterion (especially social and educational backwardness), which in the Indian context would translate into caste as indicator of backwardness. This approach lends to backwardness an identity criterion – *backward social groups are the ‘erstwhile’ lower castes*. Interestingly, instead of caste, the Commissions and institutional legal structures have used the term *class* – as in *backward classes*, thereby complicating matters further (as shall be demonstrated in the course of this work). Notwithstanding these definitional disparities, however, backwardness continues to be the lived reality in the life of this nation and its people.

Careful consideration of the different interpretations of backwardness reveals a significant point of convergence – the location of backwardness primarily is in rural India. In my thesis the focus is exclusively on a systematic study of backwardness in agrarian systems. The study of *Ghulamgiri* (Slavery) and *Shetkaryacha Asud*  

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\(^1\) The National Committee on the Development of Backward Areas identifies the following six areas as six fundamental types of backwardness: (i) chronically drought prone areas; (ii) desert areas; (iii) tribal areas; (iv) hill areas; (v) chronically flood affected areas and (vi) coastal areas affected by salinity. See appendix 1 for a detailed list of indicators used by the Chakravarty Committee.
Introduction

(Cultivator's Whipcord) by Phule\(^2\) and the political economic study of the caste system by Ambedkar\(^3\) have been the first known scholarly attempts at understanding backwardness systematically. The reason I use the agrarian systems approach\(^4\) for understanding backwardness is because it helps in exploring the relationships between social groups, production, land, environment, technology as a systemic unity - as a whole. Also crucial is the fact that backward agriculture\(^5\) plays a very important role in perpetuating this condition over time. The systematic studies of backward agriculture by Bhaduri\(^6\) has been the definitive work on this topic till date and has provided me with the theoretical framework to study agrarian backwardness. After establishing the contours of backwardness, I study the historical and structural reasons for backwardness in agrarian systems.

Political economy as a method, locates the research question historically. To evolve an understanding of backwardness in agrarian systems, the structural reasons leading to such a scenario are traced. The complexity of relations in dominantly agrestic societies compelled me to take into account a variety of issues – the question of livelihood and status, the question of control/access of land and social groups, questions of power and hegemony, material inter-dependence between various players in agrarian systems among others.

The role of social groups is crucial to understanding agrarian relations. The caste system continues till date, to be an essential source and perpetuator of backwardness in agrarian systems. The role of the state in protecting and altering agrarian relations became especially pronounced from the colonial period onwards and this is critically intertwined with what we understand as backwardness. While a study of caste or the State has

\(^2\) See Phule (1873, 1883) for the pioneering study of caste and the agrarian structure.
\(^3\) See Ambedkar (1936), Annihilation of Caste for a detailed exposition on the caste system.
\(^4\) See Harris ed. (1982) general introduction for a detailed overview of the various approaches to understand agrarian change. Harriss classifies the various approaches as systems, decision-making models and structural/historical approaches. For the course of this work, I am using both the structural/historical and systems approaches to understand agrarian system. Studying inter-relations/interdependence of forces (which is common to both the approaches) helps in giving a more detailed understanding of the backwardness which prevails in Indian agrarian systems.
\(^5\) See Bhaduri (1983, 99) for agricultural backwardness.
\(^6\) Ibid.
dominated social science research on agrarian political economy, the extremely powerful role of the market has received much lesser attention in the study of such agrarian systems. Thus, we study the political economy of backwardness in agrarian systems and look specifically at the role of social groups, states and markets.

A good starting point for a political economic study of backwardness in agrarian systems is the debate on classes and modes of production in India. There are various contending characterizations of the modes of production – semi-feudal, pre-capitalist, colonial, capitalist, dual etc. Different theorists have used various indicators, statistics, theoretical arguments, mathematical models to substantiate their claims. These important approaches throw light on the different forms of exploitation but fail to reach a consensus in characterizing classes in agrarian systems. The framework and terminology used in studying agrarian class differentiation has explicitly drawn from the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Kautsky among others. There is the dualistic notion of Rudra to Chandra’s six-fold grouping to more detailed categories used by Mencher and Patnaik. Part of the dispute regarding categories is due to various areas of research undertaken by these theorists to explain certain aspects of an agrarian system – why land reforms have/have not been implemented, why particular candidates or parties receive votes/support of specific groups, why is there perpetual indebtedness of the peasantry etc.

Some theorists like Mencher, Harriss, Gough, Prasad and Omvedt to name a few, have conducted a caste-class study at the village level across the country for different time periods and have come up with similar results – class and caste rankings overlap. On the basis of empirical results as well as the method of differentiation of classes,

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7 See Bhaduri (1983) for detailed exposition of the mechanism of forced commerce.
8 See Thorner (1982) for an excellent mapping of the mode of production debates.
9 See Patnaik (1976), Bhaduri (1972), Rudra (1969), Chandra (1974), Mencher (1974), Gough (1980), Alavi (1975). The different theorists in the mode of production debates who were theorizing on whether Indian agriculture in the sixties and seventies displayed capitalist or non-capitalist relations of accumulation. The rich debates were heavily influenced by the Marxist school of thought.
10 There are obvious differences in trying to clearly define cut-off points in size of land-holding (and other labour related indices) for different classes and more so in trying to attach numerical values to particular classes which have led to a lack of consensus.
11 Mencher studies villages in Tamil Nadu, Harriss in Southern India, Prasad in Bihar and Northern India, Omvedt in Western India.
12 Most Marxist classifications follow that of Lenin “Preliminary Draft Thesis” (1963) and Mao “How to
Theorists have undertaken the task of conducting an intensive class analysis of agrarian relations which has deeply contributed to my understanding of agrarian systems. Most importantly, agrarian class relations were and continue to be embedded in caste\(^{13}\) - whether a person controls land, has access to water, access to credit, etc. continues to be largely dependent on the person's caste status.

**Hypothesis:** First, we evolve a basic understanding of backwardness in agrarian systems. As a hypothesis we can state that the depressed agrarian classes continue to belong to backward/lower castes. Or we can restate this proposition as the identity of the exploited class reveals a common pattern of exploitation - the vast majority of women, dalits, adivasis, muslims, most backward castes constitute the depressed agrarian classes and collectively characterize backwardness. Ambedkar and Phule had laid out the basic pattern of caste and agrarian structure during the colonial (and pre-colonial) period. For my research question I follow Chakravarti (2001), who had comprehensively set forward this thesis in his seminal work on agrarian structure where he studied why the underclass\(^{14}\) in his research village had an unchanging identity. In this work I will try to establish first, whether the Chakravarti-thesis is a general or a particular phenomena in Indian agrarian systems; and then, try to analyse the structural reasons.

We are using identity as a marker for the depressed class - thus we are using the terms dalit, adivasi, muslim and most backward castes. Given the dominantly patriarchal social structure, the position of women within these groups is worse still. The overlap of identity and class reveals the presence of historical patterns which is the object of this study. The counter question to the hypothesis of social identity overlapping with class identity could be to ask the following question - is it always true that a lower-caste lower-class person (in agrarian systems) is worse off than a upper-caste lower-class person? I look into this question in the final chapter. At the outset, I must state that my enquiry is about group phenomena and some rare individual exceptions to the contrary do differentiate classes” (1967). See Patnaik (1967) for a detailed exposition of peasant class differentiation.

\(^{13}\) See Chakravarti (2001) for a excellent exposition of caste and class in the agrarian structure of Bihar.

\(^{14}\) By the term underclass I am using the definition given by Chakravarti 2001. I have also used the method of case studies for a more intensive class analysis of agrarian relations. I avoid using the term underclass because it conceals sometimes the antagonisms at the lower end of the class spectrum.
not actually dismantle the hypothesis. Another question would be to ask whether this debilitating caste-class overlap, which defines backwardness in our agrarian systems, continues unchanged. Backwardness is not a frozen/static/unchanged concept and hence, I take into account the mobility amongst social groups over time.

Village studies conducted in the eastern and southern states of India, at different points in time have typically demonstrated what we understand as backwardness\textsuperscript{15} - i.e. an overlap between class-caste i.e. the depressed class are depressed castes. Numerous empirical studies across disciplines in the social sciences have established this correlation (i.e. overlapping of caste-class hierarchies especially holding at the lower end) from pre-colonial to the present day.\textsuperscript{16} My enquiry confirms the existence of this pattern till date in large parts of this country - especially in the regions where I have conducted my primary field work\textsuperscript{17} - Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh (also referred to as the Central Forest region). Apart from these, areas in Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat (areas which I have visited and observed) confirm this pattern. Secondary sources also corroborate this pattern in other states like Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, etc.

The reality of untouchability, dowry, humiliation, stigmatisation, honour killings, coercion at work and other social surroundings are very much a part of the lived reality of the lower castes. The question of power and the centrality of the role of violence assumes relevance in my work precisely because a political economic analysis of backwardness in Indian agrarian systems would be incomplete without taking into account this lived reality of the lives of the exploited. The perpetuation of violence against men, women and children of the depressed classes/castes by members of the dominant class (who are

\textsuperscript{15} See Chakravarti (2001), Mencher (1974). Appendix 2 contains some of the detailed tables from their works.


\textsuperscript{17} Given my research area (and also my involvement with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act campaign at various levels), I have been visiting/undertaking preliminary field survey of several backward districts of the country to collect primary data on the areas related to my PhD. I have met several organisations and people working on issues of employment, food, rights over land and displacement, caste, gender, in over 30 of the most backward districts in the states of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Most of the case studies and primary data that I use to demonstrate various results are from these areas. Complete list of areas is in appendix 6.
mostly the dominant castes\textsuperscript{18} and often represented in the organs of the state) is another dimension which often gets overlooked in academic research. I want to study the centrality of power in perpetuating backwardness in agrarian systems. Thus, the overlap of class/caste (especially at the ‘lower’ end) and the perpetuation of violence against the marginalised when viewed in consonance, point to a definite structural unity in the history of exploitation prevailing in an agrarian system.

\textbf{Methodology:}

Political economy as a method, locates the subject historically. In the course of this work, I have looked at present as history – thus, I have started with the present and then traced it backwards. In the course of my research, I have broadly used the following three methods.

Empirical evidence: statistics can most convincingly establish certain facts regarding a hypothesis. I extensively use statistics, both from my primary field areas and the available governmental and academic data, to first establish the continuance of the class-caste overlap. The central theoretical concern I have when establishing these results is the situation of labour under different regimes of accumulation. Thus, the concept of unfree labour\textsuperscript{19} becomes a useful lens to look at reasons for agrarian backwardness. This leads to the second method used in this research work.

\textsuperscript{18} Dominant castes were defined by Srinivas (on the basis of three criteria – one of which is superior numerical strength. My research shows that this is not necessarily so – majority in local population is no safeguard from dominance by smaller social groups. Often ‘outsiders’ have come and plundered tribal areas and haven’t been numerical majorities.

\textsuperscript{19} See Brass (1999) for a detailed understanding of unfree labour. The concept of free (wage) labour as opposed to unfree labour is taken to be symptomatic of the existence of capitalism, while unfree labour symbolized pre-capitalist relations. Part of the confusion regarding free labour as opposed to unfree labour can be found in the works of Marx. Brass outlines three approaches to unfree labour – the neoclassical school which denies the existence of unfree labour under capitalism, one variant of the Marxist school who accept unfree labour but take it to be a signifier of pre-capitalist modes and another variant of Marxists (Brass belongs to this school) who establish that unfree labour is not only pre-capitalist but also a result of capitalist restructuring of the labour process. The third variant demonstrates that unfree labour is very much a necessary component of capitalism. My approach on unfree labour is influenced by the third school, especially the works of Brass. See also Miles (1987) on unfree labour. See also Brass and van der Linden (1997) which covers all the debates on free unfree labour.
The method of abstraction helps in establishing the structural and historical reasons for such a correlation (depressed class/caste). To establish certain facts, e.g. why caste norms are followed, or why wages are depressed, I use analytical and mathematical models. Particularly, I use a game theoretic frame to analyse hegemony of dominant social groups and their contribution to backwardness. Also, I use non-linear differential equations to explain certain patterns like depressed wages or low capital accumulation in backward agrarian systems.

I have used case studies from my field work areas to corroborate some of the findings of my study. The case study method is largely informed and applied by the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and history. Thus, it is not exactly a common tool for research in economics. I use it precisely because it is consistent with the method of political economy. The political economic methods help in mapping backwardness in agrarian systems in its entirety – along with its constitutive parts and the relations between the parts and the whole.

Structure of the Thesis:

The notion of identity which links the underclass to the deprived castes forms the edifice of the caste system. Unfree labour forms the material basis of exploitation which makes up the caste system. Apart from applying the principles of hierarchy and differentiation in the social domain, rules of governance through caste influence every dimension of the lives of the underclass – occupational status, rules of exchange, labour contracts (tenancy and others), debt repayments etc. The history of backwardness is inextricably linked to the history of the caste system. This is why the study proposes to look into the broader macro structure of the caste system through history, primarily broken into two time frames i.e. agrarian systems under the colonial state, and the post independence nation-state.

We start with empirical evidence and then use the method of abstraction. This helps in identifying linkages between the micro and the macro structure. In Chapter II (On Backwardness), the different approaches and criteria used to identify backwardness are
outlined. Archival study of government documents and secondary data are presented to get an overview of the multiple meanings of backwardness. The analysis of primary data reveals some aspects of deprivation faced by the rural poor due to backwardness. From this is culled out some related questions which provide us with the contours of backwardness in agrarian systems. Thus, most recently available data (NSS 61st, 55th, 50th rounds on Employment/ Unemployment, Census 2001, various Planning Commission Reports) is used in this and the next chapter to look into some dimensions of backwardness.

In Chapter III, the theoretical concept of Unfree Labour20 is used as the lens through which we initially look at backwardness. The theory of dialectics is the starting point in the method of abstraction. This can be understood as using binary relations (relational and relativistic – like a sliding scale)21 to understand certain concepts. Concretely, we look at the notion of unfreedom – as a binary opposite to freedom to understand the prevailing conditions and situation of labour. The debates on unfree labour and capitalism have contributed greatly to how the notion of unfreedom can be explored. I demonstrate how unfreedom is being produced and reproduced in Indian agrarian systems under neo-liberal regimes of accumulation. I use data from NSS 61st, 55th, 50th rounds on Employment/ Unemployment along with Census data and primary data collected across 6 of the most backward districts in the states of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh to examine the relevance of this concept in understanding backwardness.

Unfree labour, in the Indian agrarian context, forms the structural basis of agrarian exploitation especially through the socially constructed categories of caste and gender. The role of patriarchy and caste is vital to our understanding of backward agrarian structure. To substantiate macro data, I conclude with a micro case study from Santhal Parganas (Jharkhand) to explore the notion of unfree labour relations in agrarian systems.

20 Ibid.
21 See Breman's (2007) introduction for an exposition of this method which he employs to investigate poverty.
Unfree labour helps in the extraction of surplus. In Chapter IV (Modes of Extraction), the different modes of extraction that have been operational in agrarian systems are schematised. I specifically looked at triadic relationships (instead of binaries) which are present in agrarian systems – landlord-moneylender-state or caste-class-gender to understand the role of power. The theory of patriarchal caste-feudalism is developed with illustrations and case studies (from Palamau, Jharkhand) to further elaborate on the contours of agrarian backwardness. Patriarchal caste-feudalism relies on coercive power to maintain a stranglehold on backward agrarian structure. Thus, coercion which punishes caste rule deviations simultaneously upholds feudal and patriarchal values. This leads us to question the validity of the concept of ‘extra-economic’ coercion. If the social, political and economic relations are enmeshed (as is the case in Indian agrarian structures), then what is ‘extra-economic’? This concept has often been used by theorists of Indian agrarian structures, but its relevance can be questioned. While extra-economic coercion is relevant for studying other agrarian structures, I show how it is a limiting concept when used to study Indian agrarian structures.

The diverse definitions of backwardness have a commonality; they agree that backwardness is a group phenomenon, which affects individuals who are members of such groups. In Chapter V, the role of social groups in maintaining hegemony and perpetuating backwardness is studied. Hence instead of individual decision-making models, I study the evolution of norms (and its continuance) among social groups. Hegemony consists of two parts – coercion (violence) and consent\textsuperscript{22}. While the threat of coercion between groups results in the maintenance of hierarchy/social order, what is important is also the consent manufacturing that happens within groups which reinforce the hierarchical order. I develop a prisoner’s dilemma game (in line with the model of Bowles and Gintis on community governance)\textsuperscript{23} to understand social groups and the maintenance of norms. Depending on the conditions, norms are also broken or altered – the model takes into account a variety of such situations which help in clarifying why

\textsuperscript{22} See Gramsci (1996) for the concept of hegemony. Gramscian concept of hegemony consists of two mechanisms – coercion and consent manufacturing.

\textsuperscript{23} Bowles and Gintis (1998) for the game theoretic model on community governance, where they use a prisoner’s dilemma game to explain evolution of norms and its perpetuation.
certain caste rules survive and why some are altered. Thus, the struggle amongst social groups for hegemony, in turn, impacts agrarian dynamism.

In Chapter VI, the overall Issues in Agrarian Stagnation and Dynamism is discussed. The role of the market is the central object of study. The different modes of extraction give rise to a surplus which is realised in circulation. Thus, the market plays the crucial link in this realisation of surplus. Typically in Indian agrarian systems, the dominant groups also have a central role to play in fixing prices in various markets. Thus, a distinct feature of backwardness in agrarian systems is the inter-linkage of markets and the underpricing of labour and other collaterals which results from the deliberate manipulation by hegemonic groups/classes. This method of extraction (through price fixing) affects class efficiency and productivity. The complexity of the resultant forces contributes to agrarian stagnation or dynamism.

The Role of the State in Colonisation is studied in Chapter VII. The defining role of private property rights and law introduced by the colonial administration is studied in detail to understand the role of the state in preserving or altering agrarian class relations. The change in land relations during the colonial period have been studied by scholars. I further study forest laws and crimes, to examine the changing role of the state. I use a case study of the Dangs (Gujarat) from 1842 till 2004 to illustrate the role of the state. The colonial administration also developed other devices of rule which have a profound impact on backwardness even today – e.g. the method of census or the laws on land acquisition, the criminalisation of certain tribes, the district and police administration etc. This chapter concludes with a discussion of these various devices of rule – a majority of which are used even today.

I look at Developmentalism in a Democracy in Chapter VIII. Developmentalism in the Indian case represents the post-colonial independent nation phase from 1947 till date. Thus, we look at the contours of representative democracy and developmental planning undertaken till the present. We develop a multidimensional index of backwardness which

24 See Bhaduri (1999), Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of the evolution of land relations in eastern India under British colonialism. Also see Kumar (1965) for an analysis of land and caste relations in South India.
takes into account the various overlaps between caste-class-gender. A descriptive model is used to understand representative democracy and the politics of redistribution and recognition that have crucially affected the contours of agrarian backwardness.

I conclude with explaining how robust the notion of backwardness is. A cursory reading of the contours of my work plan may lead some to think that I am using backwardness as a static or frozen concept. Actually, at the very outset I would like to underline the fact that I do not use the term to mean so. The role of agency and assertion of oppressed groups have in the past and still continue, to contribute to agrarian change. The role of consciousness inherent in agrarian dynamics is not denied in this work. But what emerges clearly by the end of this work, is that the vice-like grip of social groups, states and markets in agrarian systems are the principal barriers to agrarian change.