

Module 2

Basic Characteristics of Indian Society

Lecture 4: Society and Culture

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SOCIETY AND CULTURE

This module deals with society of India. It discusses the nature of Indian society, processes of change, development inequalities and the major health goals as envisioned by the Eleventh Five Year Plan.

Students of sociology are primarily interested in the study of social structure and change in it. Social structure refers to patterns of expected behaviour or sum total of social institutions. “For Radcliff Brown, Malinowski and Nadel, social structure is the ‘order’ of social relationships, roles and statuses which constitute the apparent reality and are outside human mind.” (Singh, 1993). Structure is closely associated with the culture of society which refers to values and norms transmitted from one generation to another. Culture may be broadly divided into material culture and non-material culture. The former includes all the physical artefacts – tools, ornaments, material, utensils or any other object developed and used in a culture. The latter includes values and norms. Values are the standards of goodness, truth and beauty. Norms are the guidelines for behaviour. Members of society are expected to attain values by following prescribed norms (folkways, mores, laws, etc.) of society.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN SOCIETY

Indian society is characterized by poverty, illiteracy, diversity, patriarchy, importance of caste, community and tribal identity, and weak governance even after 60 years of independence. The major complexity in theorisation of Indian society lies in the fact that India has had its own unique civilization, social structure and culture and contradictions and oppositional forces within and is also greatly influenced by the world wide processes of change such as postmodernization and globalization.

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POVERTY

Poverty has a close link with all demographic processes. According to Planning Commission (2008) 27.5 percent population of the country is living below the poverty line – Rs. 356 monthly per capita consumption expenditure for rural areas and Rs. 539 for urban areas. The percent poor are slightly higher in rural areas (28.3) than in urban areas (25.7). Planning Commission also notes that there is growing consensus that the poverty line in India is too low. If the poverty line was higher, the share of the population below the poverty line would be accordingly higher. Further, only about 15 percent of the labour force is engaged in relatively high quality work in the organized sector, the rest is engaged in agriculture, self employment, unorganized sector and informal work without regular salary or job protection.

LITERACY

Literacy is supposed to be an indicator of development, particularly social development. It is also correlated with all demographic characteristics and processes. Before the advent of the British, India had its own model of education in which education was provided to all boys through schools associated with temples and madrasas, girls at home. The British rule destroyed it first and then tried to build its own model of education. This created multiple forms of inequalities. The new system helped the metropolitan people in the developed regions, especially males and upper classes, and marginalised others.

According to Census of India 2001, the level of literacy in India is 64.8 percent (Table 2.1). This means that out of 1000 person aged 7 years and above there are only 648 who can both read and write with understanding in any language. (It is not necessary for a person to have received any formal education or passed any minimum educational standard for being treated as literate. People who were blind and could read in Braille are treated to be literates.) Separately among males and females the literacy rate is 75.3 percent and 53.7 percent, respectively.

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There are significant spatial differences too. Census 2001 showed that with 90.9 percent literate Kerala has the highest literacy rate and Bihar with 47.0 percent literate Bihar has the lowest literacy rate. Within Bihar there are great disparities between men and women. The literacy rate among women in Bihar is only 33.0 percent. Out of 593 districts in India 18 had female literacy below 25 percent.

TABLE 2.1: LITERACY RATE IN INDIA

		Persons	Males	Females
Total	No. of literates	560,687,797	336,533,716	224,154,081
	Literacy rate	64.8%	75.3%	53.7%
Rural	No. of literates	361,870,817	223,551,641	138,319,176
	Literacy rate	58.7%	70.7%	46.1%
Urban	No. of literates	198,816,980	112,982,075	85,834,905
	Literacy rate	79.9%	86.3%	72.9%

Literacy does not imply education. There are literates who have never formally gone to schools. A large number of them are primary pass. Only about half of all those who join school move beyond eighth standard. Others drop out. The proportion of those who go for higher education is still very low. Moreover, there are differences according to region, social class, gender and urban-rural residence. They are correlated with and are often the cause of other forms of hierarchies. In India education is correlated well with spatial differences in demographic transition. Among women, it is associated with empowerment, domestic violence, fertility, maternal mortality, knowledge of RTI/STI including HIV and AIDS, migration and work.

What is more worrisome is that among persons of age 15-29 years only about 2 percent are reported to have received formal vocational training and another 8 percent are reported to have received non-formal vocational training. Eleventh Five Year Plan Draft says that the proportion of trained youth is one of the lowest in the world.

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SPATIAL/REGIONAL VARIATIONS

There are very significant regional variations in development. They manifest in the form of differences in demographic and economic characteristics of populations of different states. For example, while the state of Kerala has female literacy rate of 87.7 percent, Bihar has a female literacy rate of 33.1 only (Census of India, 2001). And while the states of Andhra Pradesh and Goa have as low a total fertility rate as 1.8 (i.e., below the replacement level), Bihar has a total fertility rate of 4.0 (IIPS and MI, 2008).

MAJOR SOCIAL GROUPS

The Planning Commission recognizes that the economic growth in the post-independence period has not been sufficiently inclusive. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and minorities have not benefited from development as much as others. SCs and STs are disadvantaged in terms of education, employment and income. Minorities also have lower level of income, lower participation in high quality jobs, and are more alienated, sometimes more alienated than SCs. Gender inequality also remains a pervasive problem. As a matter of fact certain types of developments have been had an adverse effect on women. In the patriarchal and patrifocal society of India women suffer discrimination both at home and outside. At home they suffer from domestic violence – sexual, emotional and physical – and outside they suffer from discrimination in employment and wages. Illiterate, rural women, from minority groups in backward regions of the country suffer from multiple disadvantages.

People of India have primordial loyalties towards caste and community. At times they become source of violent conflicts. No wonder, certain sections suffer from discrimination. Thus from the beginning, the government of independent India adopted policy of affirmative action. This led to reservation in government jobs and seats in schools and colleges for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), separately in proportion to their population. However, since caste was a local phenomenon no all-India standards could capture or do justice to complex reality of caste.

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Right from the beginning there was a feeling that there are many castes/groups which do not come under either SC or ST but are lagging behind and require special assistance. Eventually, in 1980 government accepted the reality of Other Backward Classes (OBC), and the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission (Agrawal and Aggarwal, 1991). Then 27 percent jobs in the central services were reserved for the OBC. Some years later it was followed by reservation of seats in the colleges, universities and professional institutions.

In this backdrop, the Eleventh Five Year Plan went for the concept of inclusionary growth (Planning Commission, 2008). According to the Eleventh Five Year Plan the following groups/regions/sectors need special schemes for inclusion: social groups divided into four categories of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Others; minorities, particularly Muslims; eleven special category states comprising of seven North Eastern states, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand; women and children; agriculture sector; old population; street children; physically challenged; and drug addicts. The plan aims at promotion of education and health among all the social groups, equal participation of all in the government jobs, meeting special needs of each group, and reducing inequalities. A serious reading of the draft shows that the concept of social groups has become most crucial to development plan. In this context, sociologists of population would like to study all population parameters according the social groups identified in the Plan.

In other words, for Indian demographers differences in size and growth rates as well as vital events between different social groups acquire paramount importance. At the same time the issue of social group inequality is not unaffected by the issue of regional imbalances. Certain groups, for example, may have higher fertility than others but there are also significant variations among the people belonging to the same group living in different regions. Migration is selective of caste and communities and by opening new opportunities to some it also affects the relative conditions of different communities and social relationships between them. It calls for new strategies of accommodation and opposition.

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RELIGION

India is a plural society. People belonging to all religions and faith are found here. However, according to Census of India, 2001, 80.5 percent of the population of India consists of Hindus. Next to Hindus in population are Muslims who constitute 13.4 percent of the population of India (Table 2.1).

TABEL 2.2: RELIGIOUS COMPOSITON OF INDIA

Religion	Population *	(%)
Hindus	827,578,868	80.5
Muslims	138,188,240	13.4
Christians	24,080,016	2.3
Sikhs	19,215,730	1.9
Buddhists	7,955,207	0.8
Jains	4,225,053	0.4
Other Religions & Persuasions	6,639,626	0.6
Religion not stated	727,588	0.1
Total *	1,028,610,328	100.0

72.2 percent population of India lives in rural areas. A large population of India is influenced by traditional values and norms. In urban areas also influence of religion and other customs is quite strong though the situation is changing fast.

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UNITY IN DIVERSITY

On the positive side, there is unity in diversity where democracy is firmly established. To quote Sharma (2007):

India can rightly be characterised as a society having unity in diversity and diversity in unity, as it is a plural society both in letter and spirit. Despite innumerable odds, India has maintained its unity. We find unity in India in all its historical and cultural facets. India is today a secular state. It has one Constitution and uniform rule of law for all its people living in different regions, speaking different languages, and believing in different religions and faiths. Today, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and people of other faiths participate together in administration, politics and public life. Ethnic, linguistic and religious diversities do not hinder the realization of the common national goals. The cultural heritage of India has been a living example of the synthesis of different cultures.