

Lecture 5: Social Change in India

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SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA

Change is a reality. Human society too experience changes in different domains from time to time. However, all types of changes are not covered by the term of social change which has a definite meaning in sociology. Social change refers to change in social structure. Thus change in per capita income, if not accompanied by changes in social relationships, is not a part of social change.

BOX 2.1

Ironically, despite our profession of socialistic pattern of society, our policies in social and economic fields have been most detrimental to the prosperity of the weaker sections of society, such as the dalits, the women, the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and the minorities. It is reflected also in the failure of our education policy. The mass illiteracy in the forty per cent of the population still persists. It is higher still in the case of women. There is a vicious circular relationship between poverty, susceptibility to fall a victim to exploitation, proneness to health morbidity, high fertility rate and illiteracy. Education is a single most effective factor which breaks this process of vicious cumulative causation. We find that wherever educational achievements, whether within a region or a social group are higher, the indicators of economic growth as also of the quality of life are higher. ...Our failure in the field of removal of illiteracy, and universalization of education is indeed at the root of the most facets of our "crisis of failures".

Sociologists have developed several concepts to study social change in India: development, modernization, Westernization, universalization, social development, great and little traditions are some of them. For a long time sociologists and anthropologists in India used the concepts of parochialization and universalization, and great and little traditions which were developed by McKim Marriott and Robert Redfield in studies of Indian and Mexican villages. Among such concepts Sanskritization and Westernization hold special significance.

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SANSKRITIZATION

The concept of Sanskritization is given by M. N. Srinivas. According to him, Sanskritization had been occurring throughout the Indian history. It may be viewed as the model of social mobility in India. To understand this concept it is important to distinguish between two related concepts of Varna and caste. Varna is an all-India framework and in this framework human society is divided into four hierarchical groups (Varnas). They are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Untouchables are outside the Varna system. On the other hand caste refers to hereditary, endogamous groups which form a hierarchy, each having a traditional association with one or two occupations. Castes groups maintained relations in terms of purity and pollution. There were many castes which were only regional in character. Regarding hierarchy, in each region there are certain castes which are considered to be at the top and certain other castes are considered to be at the bottom. An interesting aspect of the caste system has been that the claims to position are contested and there is no general agreement regarding hierarchy, at least at the middle level.

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Further, through Sanskritization, i.e., by changing customs, rituals, ideology and way of life towards upper castes people belonging to a particular caste claim a superior status on the caste hierarchy. This may or may not be granted by others and sometimes the matter reached the king who gave the final verdict. At times castes would fight violently till a status claimed by them is granted to them. Srinivas maintained that Sanskritization, however, led only to positional change but not structural change. This means that the perceived positions of different castes may change but it would not affect the Hindu belief in caste hierarchy. To be Hindu is to belong to a caste with a relative place in the hierarchical division.

Srinivas agrees that Sanskritization was only one source of mobility in Hindu society. Initially, he observed that Sanskritization means emulating the life styles of Brahmins. In his later works, however, he maintained that Indian culture being highly varied and the beliefs about status of a Varna being dependent on local culture, there were several models of Sanskritization: Brahmin model, Kshatriya model, Vaisya model; and Shudra model. Thus Brahmin model was only one of them. The concept of dominant caste supplemented the concept of Sanskritization in some way. At some places if the tribal groups were dominant, the other groups followed the tribal customs and thus one can also speak of a tribal model of Sanskritization.

The following example shows the process. Imagine that an outsider or an untouchable group decides to enter the caste society. By accumulating power they can enter the caste hierarchy at the level of Kshatriyas. Then the people belonging to caste of genealogists and bards create genealogical links and myths about them. Subsequently the outside or untouchable groups acquire the high Kshatriya status. Secular power influences ritual ranking.

For a long time Sanskritization may have worked.

BOX 2.2:

SANSKRITIZATION

Sanskritization is a process by which a “low” Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, a “twice” born caste. It is followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than traditionally concealed to the claimant caste by the local community. Such claims are made over a period of time, sometime a generation or two before they are conceded (Srinivas, 1966).

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The major factors in Sanskritization were:

- Fluidity of political system with bardic caste having the special privilege of legitimization of the origin of different castes and Varnas
- Position of the dominant caste
- Pilgrimage
- Migration of values and beliefs from great tradition to little tradition
- Secular factors in determining the position of caste (in addition to pollution and purity)
- Migration to new areas
- Bhakti movement that established the idea of equality before God and thus the idea of equality among different groups and castes

After independence of the country, the issue of social mobility became more complex and cases of Sanskritization, de-Sanskritization as well as re-Sanskritization (Singh, 1974) were observed. Due to the policy of positive discrimination adopted by Indian government now an increasing number of groups laid claim to backward status rather than high status. Some of them claim a backward status in state matters and a forward status in society.

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WESTERNIZATION

Different people defined the term westernization in different ways. Srinivas used this term for all those changes that affected all Indians during British rule (after establishment of Pax Britannica) and which accelerated later. Thus it refers to “the change brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of over 150 years of British rule, the term subsuming changes occurring at different levels...technology, institutions, knowledge, and values.” Westernization changed the society and culture of India significantly. It produced:

- Humanitarianism
- Secularism
- Equalitarianism
- Rationality
- Attack on untouchability

Rationality and humanitarianism may be called the hallmark of Westernization. Srinivas recognizes the importance of local culture in determining the nature of Westernization. For many people it produced “cultural schizophrenia” (in a non-pathological sense) which means that people who became Westernized in some domains of life (mostly in office) maintained tradition in other domains (for example at home). It must be noted that there were different Western influences on different people of India because different people in India came in contact of different types of British people: administrators, army men, traders, and Christian missionaries. Srinivas also showed that the movement from tradition to Westernization was not linear: Westernization also produced revivalism, nationalism, communalism, casteism (vertical and horizontal solidarity), heightened linguistic consciousness, regionalism and passionate xenophobia (among Muslims). In some contexts Westernization led to rejection of the tradition while in others it led to mixing or combination of traditions and Western influences.

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GLOBALIZATION AND GLOCALIZATION

In 20th century India both society and population have changed. India is experiencing several processes of change, such as demographic transition, industrialization and urbanization, skill development, social mobility, legal changes and greater assertion of autonomy. Among them effects of globalization and glocalization are very significant and far reaching. Globalization is economic and glocalization is cultural. The former concept refers to free flow of labor and capital across international borders, and the latter refers to spread of the culture of globalization through local cultures. Glocalization has given rise to new meanings of tradition and modern. Although Lee (1994,a) defined glocalization as the simulation of modernity for the spread of commodity forms in local cultures, it cannot be isolated from the replacement of thought categories in the process of commodity glocalization.

These processes of change have both functions and dysfunctions. Among the positive developments are: opening of demographic window (due to declining birth rate, lower life expectancy in old age, and progression of baby boom children); improvement in literacy rate; rapid expansion of education at all levels; greater flow of labor, capital and technology across international borders with emigrants sending a significant part of remittances; increased productivity of service and industrial sectors; infrastructure development; promotion of tourism; new opportunities abroad due to aging of industrialized economies; some empowerment of women; and new ideas of equality and justice. Among the dysfunctions are: environmental degradation; increasing marginalization among the agricultural laborers and artisans; rising disparities; religious and community bigotry promoted by leaders, media and market; trafficking of women and children; a large number of cases of female feticide; violence against women; and at the root of many other dysfunctions, *an idea that all the emergent problems of the country are due to history.*

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Sociologists have focused on social change and demographers on demographic changes. There is a need to understand the link between the social and demographic changes.

BOX 2.3: GLOBALIZATION AND GLOCALIZATION

From Lee (1994b):

- (1) Under contemporary conditions of globalization that are characterized by a dissemination of Western knowledge and technology, the notion of culture seems to be losing its underlying exclusiveness that once defined disparate identities and symbolic variances of peoplehood. The commodification of culture and the global spread of the culture industry have apparently contributed to this leveling process.
- (2) The crisis of modernity and representation in the West is generally a cultural crisis that reveals a recognition of and despondency over the dark side of the Enlightenment. The irony is that the jaded promises of the Enlightenment have been globalized and have found niches in the developing world under the sign of a simulated modernity.
- (3) The simulation of modernity is however a complicated process that hinges on glocalization where the global is tailored to the local and vice versa. The outcome is not a simple local adaptation of the modernity paradigm, but possibly a revivification of traditional lifeworlds to alter modernity beyond its original image. Although the simulation of Western modernity, the power of traditionalisms in the developing world suggests that there can be no one modernity and thereby exposes the falsity of a Third World modernization.