UNIT 8 CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN VILLAGE*

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Learning Objectives:

After going through this unit, you will learn about:

- the anthropological tradition of village studies;
- the anthropological perspective of rural society and its economy in India;
- the interrelationships among various inhabitants in the village community; and
- the peasantry, rural agriculture and the changes that are taking place.

8.0 INTRODUCTION

Village studies in India have been the concern of not only anthropologists, but also sociologists, historians, economists and other social scientists. However, contribution of anthropologists has been quite commendable. While administrators and ethnographers of the colonial government showed great interest in understanding the village community, it was for their own purpose of governance and understanding. Anthropologists focused on the same, but in the background of human history. Indian villages provide remarkable evidence of the evolutionary processes through which human civilization has passed, from the stage of rural community of settled agriculture to the stage where human communities are characterized by specialized economy, private ownership and emergence of leadership based on surplus economy.

After the independence, anthropological studies of rural society were carried out both for academic interests as well as national development concerns. In the academic domain, these became a testing ground of the anthropological methods of data collection such as participant observation by living in the village for long durations and descriptive analysis of the qualitative data gathered, as opposed to the Indological studies that were deeply entrenched in dwelling upon the Sanskrit texts to gain an understanding of Indian society of the past. The anthropologists opted the “field view” rather than the “book view”; and continued the civilizational approach.

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The village in India represents the peasant community and its connection with the urban society. While the closed society everywhere else gradually transformed into class societies with the growth of markets and industry, western scholars argue that Indian society has remained unchanged, even though India was ruled by various rulers, not only Hindu but also Mughal and British. However, Indian scholars have maintained that Indian society did undergo changes due to sanskritization, westernization and modernization, though the basic structure has remained the same; and the pace at which it has been changing due to external and internal forces has increased during the post-colonial period.

The government of India, in its efforts to modernize society, consciously introduced planned change. The global trend of inter-connections of nation states, markets and globalization have affected the rural masses of India. While social scientists have employed different theoretical perspectives such as functionalism, class and Marxism to study villages, anthropologists have largely adhered to structural-functionalism and structuralism. Of late, academic debates and discussions have centered on issues such as validity of village as a unit of analysis and methods of data collection for understanding the complexity of Indian society.

In the present unit our focus is on the characteristics of Indian villages.

History of Village Studies

Anthropological studies of the Indian village began in 1950s with short essays published in edited volumes (Marriott 1955, Srinivas 1955). The first full-length book on this topic was Dube’s *Indian Village*, which came out in 1955. The number of such publications increased in 1960s but declined sharply after late 1970s through 1990s. However, in late 1990s, such studies reappeared in the form of ‘re-study’ of the Indian village. All these studies mainly deal with the cultural life of rural populations. These are considered important contributions not only for understanding Indian rural society and its changing patterns but also as an important source of information to the government, economists and others for planning and development of the nation.

From the cultural point of view, the village is seen as a ‘microcosm’ of the larger complex Indian society that has a long history of civilization. Close observation of the village society reveals that the village is not an isolated entity. It is the melting pot of the past, present and future Indian societies. The re-studies essentially trace the social and economic changes and emerging new forms of the village. Some of these also pay special attention to certain important dimensions of village life such as kinship, politics, inequality, exploitation, gifts, resistance, and rituals. These works enable us to understand the characteristics of Indian village as opposed to say, a Mexican village or any other, as also urban India.

Demographic Facts

As one moves from north to south or east to west, one finds villages of various sizes in terms of demography and composition of households. Such variations can be mapped along linguistic lines or by geographical location. Nevertheless, there is both a degree of similarity as well as difference between villages. No village is a replica of another and each has its own distinctiveness in terms of its history, composition, geographical background, mode of life etc. Some villages could have as few as 500 inhabitants and some as many as 2,500. Some are closer to urban centers and others, farther away.
During colonial times, according to Diane P. Mines, some villages were “joint” and some were “severalty (ryotwari)”.

- The joint villages, mostly in Northern India, are further subdivided into pattidari and zamindari.
  - In Punjab province there were villages of pattidar in which separate land shareholders lived.
  - In zamindari villages the tenant lived in the village while the zamindar lived in the same village or a different one.
- The “severalty” category of villages is mostly found in central India. In this form, individual households owned the land.

Srinivas writes about two types of villages found in the west coast of Kerala and Gujarat.

- Nucleated villages: where all diverse inhabitants congregate in one location,
- Dispersed villages: where the inhabitants are segregated and households of one lineage or unilineal group live together and cultivate the land held by its members.

Further, in some villages all the inhabitants are Hindu while in some others there can be both Hindu and Muslim inhabitants. In yet others, there could be inhabitants who have embraced different religions. They may also differ in terms of ethnic composition. Some villages are inhabited by different castes, while others are composed of castes and tribes. Some tribal villages are of exclusively one tribe, yet others consist of different tribes occupying different locations in the village.

Further, while in most villages, all the villagers speak the same language, in some, the inhabitants speak more than one language, being bi-lingual or tri-lingual. With all these differences, the Indian village has always been in a position of advantage, to shape the political, social and cultural outlook of its people.

In the colonial times when communication was poorly developed, the villagers lived in relative isolation as they were connected to only few villages in the vicinity. The physical isolation had its own impact on the inhabitants, but as communication improved, the networking of villagers increased as also the impact of external factors on them, through mass media. Today, most of the villages in the country are connected by road except few that are located in inaccessible hilly terrains, and those that become isolated during events such as floods.

**Check Your Progress**

1) In which years anthropological studies of the Indian village began and declined?

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Social Organization

Village Council: Each village has a village council having representatives of important and different social groups, which may be based on language, caste, tribe, religion etc. All issues pertaining to the village or between the social groups are discussed in the village council.

In turn each social group has its own internal council with heads of all households as its members. Any dispute with regard to traditional norms of the group, marital issues between members, land issues or any issue that requires involvement of the group level council are brought before it for resolution.

The village was originally vertically connected to the chiefdom that functioned under a chief whose superior authority was the king, the ruler of the region. During the colonial period, such vertical structure lost its significance and totally disappeared in the post-colonial era.

Caste and the village: In a multi-caste village, households of several castes live together. Usually each caste member occupies a particular space. While the numerically dominant caste usually takes the central location, the ritually impure caste households remain in the fringe or outside of the village or even outskirts of the village. Each caste generally has a history of its origin, mostly as oral tradition. These castes operate in a system of interdependent relations, known as the jajmani system. William Wiser, a missionary, when writing about Karimpur village in Uttar Pradesh, for the first time described these interdependent caste relations as the dominant characteristic feature of the Indian village, which he called the jajmani system. Anthropologists have debated and discussed quite extensively on the nature of the jajmani system and the changes that are taking place.

Different forms of jajmani system have been discovered in different parts of the country:
- Balutidari or vatandari (Maharashtra),
- Hali (Gujarat),
- Ayakattu (Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh),

Each caste group in the village is bound by its own norms and regulations in terms of practiced dress and ornaments, marriage and other life cycle rituals – birth, puberty and death. As regards the location of their stay in the village and the nature of relationship between them, some groups are part of the village while some are partly out of the village.

In several south Indian villages, Brahmins are partly out of the village for they are superior to everybody else, the untouchable castes are also partly out of the village as they are considered inferior to the main caste groups of the village. The Muslims usually stand outside the village. In this kind of structured relations, ethnic groups that occasionally live in a multi-caste village are also partly out of the village but usually placed above the untouchables in the social hierarchy. Thus, not only is there a hierarchical structure in the village community, but also a sense of being or not being a part of the village.

In tribal concentrated areas villages may have either households of a single tribe or more than one tribe. In certain tribal pockets, one finds features of multi-caste
villages in tribal hamlets. Few households of different tribes live together occupying a common territory, each tribe has a specific role to play in the village and thus they maintain distinctive socio-economic relations. Such situations are found in Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu where Kota live along with Toda and Badaga. Similarly, in Visakhapatnam Agency area Mukha Dora, Konda Dora, Kota and Valmiki tribe have socio-economic relations. While one tribe is a ritual specialist, another is music player, yet another takes the role of settling disputes and so on.

Either a caste or a tribe may be endogamous. Interestingly enough, the ideas of exogamy and endogamy are also extended to the village. In North India, villages are exogamous which means a woman cannot be married to a man of the same village, rather she is given in marriage to some other village. Further, a man cannot marry a woman of the village from where a woman was already given in marriage to the man’s village, in an earlier transaction. Thus marital transactions take place across the villages.

In South India, since there is preferential cross-cousin marriage, a brother’s son marries daughter of sister’s son or father’s sister’s son marries sister’s daughter. Thus in these cases, marriages do take place within the village.

**Solidarity**: The village not only has physical unity, but also social solidarity. A person identifies with the village as his/her native village where one is born. The characteristics attributed to the village apply to all who reside there regardless of caste identity. Families belonging to different castes of the same village also exhibit solidarity despite the fact that they are segregated and unrelated either through agnatic or affinal relations. However, a caste stands united against another when a dispute arises between a member of a caste and a member of another caste. Such unity stands even across village boundaries. A caste whose members are few gets support from the same caste of another village in case of need, such as a conflict or physical assault. It is also important to note that at times caste alignment takes place on grounds such as ritual purity, economic dependence, common interest and so on. It would not be uncommon if, in a serious dispute between an untouchable caste and an upper caste, the latter draws support from all upper castes.

**Dominant caste**: Srinivas (1955) has developed the concept of dominant caste, which helps us in understanding village life. According to him, a dominant caste is:

- numerically large
- enjoys high ritual status,
- has political and economic strength.

The members of this caste play an important role in the village council in decision making. They settle the disputes of other castes, for they can exercise physical coercion if need be, and outweigh others in physical strength. It also sets a model for others to follow, to respect the code of every other caste in the village, even when some of their norms may not be the same.

**Joint family**: Studies have revealed that the ideal type of family, i.e. joint family, is more commonly found in villages. The joint family is usually related to the economy of the households. While such families are generally patriarchal and patrilineal, in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya states, some castes and tribes
Peasants and Peasantry

maintain matrilineal joint families. The joint family system has been declining in India over the years. Often, a family undergoes a cycle of joint family to nuclear family to joint family in the course of time, which means that a joint family breaks down into a nuclear one when the members cannot maintain it, for example, brothers demanding separate living. Later, one such nuclear family may develop into a joint family. Nevertheless, joint families are found mostly among the economically sound upper castes rather than poor lower and untouchable castes. The nuclear families comprising the joint family usually live together under the same roof or share a compound. Normally they together hold their land as undivided holding. The inheritance, and division of joint property, movable and immovable, if necessary, follow the rules of Hindu Succession Act, legislated on the basis of traditional code of conduct enshrined in the Hindu scriptures. Traditionally, women did not inherit property, but now they have the right to inheritance.

The *jajmani* system: Social relations in the village are largely based on agrarian economy. The dominant caste possesses most of the agricultural land in the village, though the size of the holding by individual families may vary. All castes traditionally practiced their defined occupations, which were immutable. The *jajman* or *yajman*, is the ritual head of the household and also the owner of landed property. The castes that provide services to this household such as the Brahmmin, carpenter, washerman, barber and others are known as the *kamins*. The *jajman* and the *kamins* comprise the *jajmani* system. These could be understood as patron and client; the patron who owns land maintains permanent and inherited relations with one of the households of the client’s caste. Though the clients provided services throughout the year, the patron made payments for the services rendered in the traditional practice by giving grain at the threshing floor during harvest. What should be the amount of payment is arrived at by mutual agreement in the beginning of the year, which can be reevaluated only in the next year. Only in exceptional cases, the patron changed their clients. The patrons engaged daily wage labourers from time to time depending on the need for agricultural operations.

The service castes extend their services to the village temples as well. During festivals when the gods are worshipped in the temples, the service castes provide their services of cleaning the temple premises, lighting, music etc., similar to the patrons in the village. In the village rituals of South India, participation of untouchable castes is mandatory though their entry into the temples of Sanskritic deities is restricted.

The number of families of service castes would be fewer than the number of patrons. Therefore, in some villages the clients make their own arrangement of equal distribution of their patrons. A few washermen or barber families may have to serve a large number of patrons; so, they equally distribute the families of patrons which are of different sizes and serve them for a specific period, and then there will be redistribution of patron families such that one need not serve a large family which may provide a substantial income all the time or a small family that may not provide as much income.

The *jajmani* relations are not restricted to the village in case of service castes. They often extend their services to the neighbouring villages also. In a village if there is no barber, the barber of the neighbouring village offers his services. Further, as the castes are divided into sub-castes, in some cases, the sub-castes
are specialized in certain professions. In such cases, the sub-castes maintain permanent relations with patron castes and sub-castes in different villages in the area. For example, in Nellore and Chittoor districts of Andhra Pradesh, the Kommulollu of Madiga sub-caste provide funeral music to Golla caste. The former does not live in all villages; these families of x-village provide services to the Golla caste families living in the villages of a particular area (a). Likewise, Kommulollu of y-village provide their services to the Gollas of another area (b). Whenever there is a need of their services, they visit the patron family that lives in the other village and perform the traditional role.

It is argued that the interdependency of castes has sustained the system for ages, and provided guaranteed employment to all service castes. In fact, this system is not purely economic; being hierarchical in nature, it is blended with personal and emotional bonds between individuals. As a result, the clients enjoyed several benefits apart from sustenance. The system integrates all the castes and gives a sense of unity among its inhabitants. However, there are divergent opinions in this regard, as some scholars are of the view that the system is inherently exploitative and the service castes and landless labourers are exploited by the landholding upper castes. Most importantly, as Louis Dumont argued, jajmani relations are not basically economic in nature, rather they are religious in nature and the payments made to the service castes do not necessarily follow the economic principle of value of services and goods.

It is important to note that the relations between the patron and the client are no longer permanent, and in most of the cases they are replaced by contractual arrangements. The payments in kind are now replaced by cash. Further, today individuals from all castes have the freedom to practice any occupation.

Check Your Progress
2) Define jajmani system.
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Landholding and Agriculture

The backbone of village economy is essentially agriculture, though not everyone depends on land and agriculture. A few live on cattle tending, petty trade and business, masonry, tailoring, leather work, service in government offices and so on. More than three fourths of the families live on agriculture; these are families of landlords, marginal farmers and agricultural labourers.

The Cultural Background of Agriculture: Land ownership patterns and land regulations have undergone tremendous changes through the ages. Ancient India saw individual as well as collective ownership of land. There also existed the phenomenon of conquest, appropriation and collection of revenue. The king was considered the owner of the land, though communal and private landed property existed. Brahmins cultivated land despite being proscribed to practice cultivation.
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According to Manu, Brahmins must devote themselves to study and meditation and become priests. Cultivation was to be carried out by Shudras, and untouchables who stayed outside the village.

A clearer picture emerges during the colonial period with the emergence of systematic collection of revenues. At the time zamindari, ryotwari and mahalvari systems were prevalent. There existed a large population of attached landless agricultural labour, who were not entitled to hold land. In South India, they were sold along with the land.

The following land was rent-free and not transferred to others:

- Land donated to Brahmins (brahmadeya land),
- Land donated to temples for maintenance (strotriyaam land),
- Land donated to service castes in the village (inam land),
- Lands belonging to the masjid (inam land).

Neither brahmadeya nor inam land was cultivated by the Brahmins or service castes. Rather, they were leased out to others. The temple’s or masjid’s inam lands were also leased out, and not necessarily to Hindu or Muslim cultivators but others as well.

**Land Tenure**: Independent India not only abolished zamindari system but also brought land reforms and redistributed surplus land to the landless and the inam lands to those who cultivated them. The land acquired through bhoodan and sarvodaya movements were also distributed. A large chunk of land still remains in the hands of upper caste landlords who belong to the erstwhile feudal system, though some of them are now poor farmers, and very few of them even landless. While most of the middle and service castes hold small extent of land and quite a few are landless, most of the scheduled castes are landless labourers, though a few hold marginal extent of land.

However, to a large extent, peasantry of rural India is characterized by the relations between landlord who is able to engage tenants, and tenant who does not have land or possesses unviable land and engages in tenancy. Some landlords engage annual servants. In annual service, an individual enters into an agreement with a landlord as a farm servant for a fixed wage either in cash or grain or both, in addition to food one or two times a day and one or two pairs of clothes. In some cases, the traditional practice of landlord engaging a servant family is followed. In this relationship, husband and wife are engaged in the service of the landlord and his family as per established tradition. There are instances in which a landless man or woman borrows money from a landlord under the condition of providing farm or domestic service to clear the debt. But in several cases, they fail to do so and renew the bondage or borrow afresh after payment of the first one, and thus they perennially remain debtors. Such an institution of bonded labour now stands outlawed. This is the broad spectrum of land tenure relations.

**Crops and Migration**: Most agriculture in India depends on rains despite existent sources of irrigation such as village tanks, individual open wells, tube wells and irrigation canals. Over a period of time food crops have been replaced by commercial and cash crops. Both, means of irrigation and cultivation of cash crops have brought about significant changes in the socio-economic conditions of villagers, and consequently changes in social relations. With cash taking a
predominant place, contractual relations have become more prevalent. Urbanization has led to increased avenues of higher education and employment, either in service or trade or business, resulting in large scale migration of rural elites and rich to towns and cities, leaving the lands to tenant farmers. In this way few families belonging to castes in the middle of the hierarchy as well as untouchables became tenant farmers or share-croppers. Thus, increased communication facilities and employment outside the village, leading to migration of villagers to towns and other parts of the country has impacted general rural life as well as land tenure systems.

Problems: It is important to note that agriculture has been under distress for a long time. The country has witnessed a spurt of peasant unrest and movements in 1960s. There has been high dependency of farmers on money lenders; rural banking has been trying hard to alleviate the situation. Lack of remunerative prices and proper market facilities, and loan repaying capacity has been leading farmers to committing suicides too. The issues of agriculture remain unresolved; rural poverty, feminization of economy and unemployment continue to remain on the top of the national agenda, to be solved.

Impact of Market Economy on Village and Globalization

Indian villages have never been self-sufficient as contended by colonialist scholars; they were a part of a wider network of economic, political and religious matters. The jajmani system provided caste-based services supported by an agricultural economy. Cottage industries based on agricultural produce such as cotton, silk, jute and toys made from forest produce flourished in Indian villages. All these industries are of small scale that individual or joint families managed. Weekly markets have been the characteristic feature of both caste and tribal villages, where goods - food grains, vegetable, cattle and others - are exchanged through barter system since ancient times. Even labour followed the same system in which payments were made in kind rather than cash, till the colonial regime when monetized economy fast replaced barter system. Though coins of gold and other metals existed during pre-colonial India, barter system prevailed in villages. Such markets are found throughout India even today despite the prevalence of organized and developed markets.

India has been known for trade and business for ages. Though villages depended mainly on agrarian economy and food crops grown were meant essentially for personal consumption, certain crops and spices grown on the west coast have attracted European and Arab traders since time immemorial. Thus, India has been connected to international markets for a long time.

The East India Company of the Great Britain purchased spices and agricultural produce such as cotton, turmeric, and jute from India. Later, the colonial government established processing industries of the same in different port cities of India. This not only brought rapid urbanization but also promoted growing of crops needed for feeding the industries in England. After colonization, the British introduced commercial crops like tobacco, indigo, rubber, tea and coffee which replaced the traditional crops, and reduced the cultivation food crops.

In the unorganized market, the buyers usually visit villages and directly interact with the producers, fix the price through bargaining and purchase the produce by paying cash. Often times, the price is fixed before the harvest and advance or
total payment is made. In either case, the buyer remains in the advantageous position. In the colonial period, these buyers were mostly mediators who sold the products to the city or seaport based businessmen and exporters of goods to foreign countries through sea routes. With the increase of transport facility some farmers directly engaged with the Indian businessmen who in turn sold them to foreign business houses. Thus, villages have been connected to international markets. However, urbanization and industrialization also fostered rural-urban migration at a large scale. Most of the migrants are unskilled labour and such migrations have affected agriculture as well as cottage industries. The finished industrial products of England such as fabric affected cottage industries as people preferred industrial products.

The trend has continued in the post-independence era. For instance, energization of agricultural wells and use of tractors for agriculture made the services of communities that produced leather goods for drawing water from wells redundant. The need for agricultural labourers also reduced, including those who took care of the oxen, for they were replaced by tractors. However, there arose the need for technicians and mechanics to service the tractors and this led to the breeding of new technical labour. Since only men could drive the tractors, women lost their work in the fields, and became dependent on men, which affected the social status that they enjoyed earlier. Similarly, with the availability of oil produced in the mills, the communities of oil producers lost their livelihood. Likewise, cinema industry badly affected folk media, folk artists and story tellers that villagers patronized, and along with them we lost the traditional myths and stories which were part of our cultural heritage.

As discussed above the process of globalization of India started several centuries ago but its impact has been felt more after 1980s with the liberalization of Indian economy and the new industrial policy after 1990s. Though globalization has several dimensions and scholars are of the view that it has both positive and negative impacts, here we are concerned with its effect on village economy. The exposure of villages to global markets has increased the scope for export thereby increasing the farmers’ income, but at the same time the farmers stand in competition with others. Since Indian villages lack infrastructural facilities it becomes extremely difficult for them to withstand international competition. As foreign products are now available in the local markets there is a tremendous pressure on farmers to produce quality products. There is a need to provide communication connectivity and technical knowledge and skills to the rural folk which will facilitate their participation in international markets. As farmers are inclined to produce products which have international demand, they have been neglecting local needs. This has resulted in a change in dietary habits, affecting the health of rural population.

Check Your Progress

3) What is zamindari, ryotwari and mahalvari system? Explain.
8.5 SUMMARY

The unit has provided a bird’s eye view of the characteristics of Indian villages and the changes that have happened over the years. It has touched upon the following:

- demographic facts,
- types of villages in terms of composition, geographical spread, social organization with reference to interdependency of castes through the age-old traditional institutions,
- dominant caste,
- landholding and agricultural practices which shaped typical social relations based on agricultural economy and the ideology of caste,
- markets with changing economy and exposure to international market due to globalization.

Students are expected to gain an objective understanding of the Indian village through anthropological studies that have a long tradition and history.

8.6 REFERENCES


8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK PROGRESS


2) In a multi-caste village, households of several castes live together, usually each caste occupies a particular space. The numerically dominant caste usually takes the central location, while the ritually impure caste households remain in the fringe or outside of the village or even outskirts of the village. Usually each caste would have a history of its origin, mostly as oral tradition. These castes exist in a system of interdependent relations, which is known as jajmani system

3) Zamindari, ryotwari and mahalvari were systems of revenue collection that emerged during the colonial period.