
UNIT 3 FOLK URBAN CONTINUUM

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Describe the concept of Folk-Urban Continuum proposed by Robert Redfield
- Grasp how McKim Marriot employed and further refined it in the Indian context
- Identify concepts including semi-urban, peri-urban, towns and two-tier cities

3.0 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we learnt how the Chicago and the Manchester schools contributed to the growth of urban anthropology. This unit is about folk-urban continuum, a concept developed by Robert Redfield (1897-1958), a prominent Chicago anthropologist. Robert Redfield contributed to urban anthropology by studying relationships between urban and other types of settlements. Human settlements around the world vary a great deal in their geography, size and structure. They can be broadly divided into two types, rural and urban. Rural areas are marked by agriculture as the chief activity. The urban areas are the seats of commerce, trade and administration. However, both the rural and urban do not exist in a vacuum or isolation. There is a movement of both people and practices from one place to the other. This flow of ideas, traits and patterns from rural to urban and urban to rural can be termed as a continuum.

Continuum also can be understood in terms of continuity. When we speak of the folk-urban continuum, we refer to the continuity between rural and urban areas. At one end of this continuous scale lies the village life. At the other end of this continuum is urban life. Both the urban and the rural are social formations, and they interact with each other. This ceaseless interaction between the rural

and urban is the study matter of the folk-urban continuum. The folk and urban continuum explain how the imprints of the urban life reach and get absorbed into the folk life. The vice versa is also true whereby certain cultural traits of the village life develop and become a part of the urban life. The folk-urban continuum also shows how, over time, villages transform into towns and then cities.

The concept of rural-urban continuum is about social, political, cultural and economic interactions between the villages and the towns or cities. Many cultural traits are diffused from cities to rural areas. For example, dress patterns diffuse from cities to rural areas. Besides these, new thoughts and ideologies are also diffused from the cities to the rural areas due to increased communication via radio, television, newspapers and social media.

3.1 CONTINUITIES BETWEEN RURAL TO URBAN

Urbanisation has increased the continuity between rural and urban areas. The whole gamut of occupational diversification, the spread of literacy, education and mass communication have contributed to this increased continuity. Many modern agricultural technological innovations and institutional frameworks for rural development find their origin in the urban centres. The process of urbanisation has facilitated the large scale commercialisation of agriculture. Similarly, agricultural requirements for machinery have generated the growth of manufacturing units in urban areas. As evident, some of the rural demands are met through the urban centres and vice versa.

Folk society and urban society are conceived of as polarities at opposite ends of a continuum. The folk society and the urban society have a very abstract relationship to social reality. Both are synthetic compound of characteristics that are lifted out of fundamental social situations. However, the ideal folk or the ideal urban societies cannot be found. According to Robert Redfield, who was the first to discuss the concept of folk-urban continuum, the ideal type of folk and urban society is a type which is not a reduction of the particular characteristics of many societies; the features which these societies share in common and which together might make for a necessary and sufficient description of the type wherever it is found (Mintz, 1953).

According to Mintz (ibid), the folk society is marked by isolation compared to the urban society. There is a high degree of genetic and cultural homogeneity, slow culture change, pre-literacy; small numbers; minimal division of labour; simple technology (with every individual as a primary producer). The social organisation is based on blood and fictive kinship; behaviour is traditional and uncritical, and there is a tendency to view the inanimate and nonhuman world personally. Furthermore, there is a viewing of traditional objects which acts as sacred with the pervasive importance of magic and religion, thus resulting in ritual behaviour in all areas of life. Redfield defined urban society primarily as the absence or opposite of these characteristics present in folk society.

Redfield described three principal processes of change from folk to urban: secularisation, individualisation, and disorganisation. To what degree these processes are interrelated has not been made clear, although Redfield welcomed

the work of those who have sought to show in various cases that change of one kind may take place without a change of another. Sol Tax, for instance, has described a folk-like social situation for Guatemala, where individualisation and commercialism are well advanced. Spicer studied what he and Redfield regard as folk like society existing on the very margins of an urban centre, and features of both folk and urban types are present in curious juxtaposition (Mintz, 1953).

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the continuities between rural and urban areas.

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3.2 FOLK URBAN CONTINUUM: ROBERT REDFIELD AND MCKIM MARRIOT

The concept of folk-urban continuum is explained and understood through Robert Redfield's landmark study, which he later published in the form of a book. The book was titled *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* and published in 1941. It was based upon a comparative study of the four communities: city society, town society, peasant society, and folk society. He had selected these four communities or societies from the Mexican province of Yucatan. The four communities located in the Mexican province with different habitations were Marida (city society), Diztas (town society), Chankom (a peasant village) and Tuski (village of folk society). In the Yucatan study, Redfield and his co-workers compared these four different communities in order to analyse and explain the cultural contrast between the Spanish and modern urban civilisation of the northwest area of the peninsula and the more indigenous southeast. The general conclusion of this work was that the same relative order of the four different communities on the map of Yucatan, from tribal village to city, also corresponds to decreasing isolation and homogeneity and increasing secularisation, individualism, and cultural disorganisation.

Redfield called this order a folk-urban continuum with a folk-type society and culture at one end and urban civilisation at the other. He also suggested the following general hypotheses:

- 1) that the primitive and peasant societies (as isolated, homogeneous local communities) tend to have the general character of a 'folk' type of society;
- 2) that as these come into contact with the urbanised society, they change in the direction of an 'urban' type; and
- 3) that the different changes are interdependent, as changes in some of the characteristics of a society tend to bring about, or at least go with other changes.

This folk-urban continuum; is a one dimensional, linear continuum connecting different points on a map. The four communities selected for study are four separate points treated as if they all exist simultaneously without essential interrelation; civilisation, meaning chiefly Spanish and modern western, is associated with one of the points, the capital city of Merida.

The Mayan civilisation, having been decapitated by the Spanish conquest, does not enter the picture. Redfield was quite aware that this model has historical implications, chiefly along the lines of the age-area principle. He writes, for example, that it could be used to reconstruct; a sort of generalised hypothetical account of the history of the culture of Yucatan as a whole. Similarly, it might be validly asserted that a comparative description of communities encountered as one goes from Paris southward through Marseilles, Algiers, the Sahara, and then Sudan would provide the vague outlines of the cultural history of Western Europe. However, he believes this would be a crude way to derive even the most tentative historical conclusions. While he used the available history of Yucatan, the whole study follows a comparison of present conditions in one community with present conditions in the others. The historical dimension is left to historians and archaeologists (Redfield, 1941: 340-42.)

Redfield observed a pronounced continuum between the cultures of these four communities. He put Merida on one end of the continuum and Taski on the other end. Based on the study of the cultural traits of these four societies, Redfield observed that Taski and Merida displayed a high degree of cultural variations. However, Merida and Diktas society, on the one hand, and Chankom and Taski on the other shared lot of similarities. However, some commonness or similarities were also between Diktas and Chankom, especially in shops and intermediaries. Since the city community shared a lot with the town community, the peasant community and the folk community also showed resemblance accordingly, Redfield described Merida and Diktas as urban communities and Chankom and Taski as folk communities. Based on this significant empirical study, Redfield concluded that no known society should be precisely the same as the societies on these two poles. However, different societies may share some cultural features of these two extreme poles (Hasnain, 2010: 182).

According to the folk-urban-continuum, the folk society comes in contact with urban society and inherits specific characteristics. In this way, a folk society has specific characteristics of folk and certain characteristics of urban society. Redfield explains that the folk society is between literate and illiterate, between developed and undeveloped societies. It was observed that folk society begins to lose some of its characteristics because of urban contact. Isolation, kinship system, group feeling, homogeneity slowly wane from the folk community.

Redfield wrote that 'the increase of contacts, heterogeneity and disorganisation of culture, are sufficient causes of secularisation and individualisation'. Thus Redfield says that the folk like community lost its isolation through contact with the city, it became more heterogeneous, a market economy developed, and an indication of disorganisation appeared. Increased contact with any dissimilar society results in a change. The evidence of disorganisation and secularisation, and impersonal behaviour was more evident in the relationship between different ethnic community elements. Any attempt to characterise society and compare it with others highlights that the folk-urban continuum deals with the

relative degree of presence or absence of polar characteristics (Miner 1952). Redfield stated that if a society loses its isolation or homogeneity, it becomes secularised, and its members work more for their interest rather than in the interest of others. However, the comparison of Yucatan with that of Guatemala led Redfield to conclude that ‘there is no single necessary cause for secularisation and individualisation’.

Sol Tax observed that Guatemala societies were ‘small... homogenous in beliefs and practices... with relationship impersonal... and with familial organisation weak, with life secularised and individuals were acting more from economic or other personal advantages than from any deep thought of social good’. Redfield regarded Tax’s observation as suggesting that the development of the money economy may be another sufficient cause of secularisation and individualisation. Robert Redfield’s continuum scheme defines an ideal type, and the folk society is the polar opposite of urban society. The ideal type is a mental construct, and no known society precisely corresponds to it. According to Miner (1952), criticisms of the folk-urban concept might be classed under three general headings:

1. the problem of lack of fit between the empirical evidence on particular societies and the nature of these societies, which one might expect from the ideal type construct,
2. the problem of definition of the characteristics of the ideal types, and
3. the limited theoretical insight provided by the continuum.

Oscar Lewis pointed out that the folk concept is an ideal and hence a matter of definition. It is upon the heuristic value that the type and its related continuum must be judged. In his book, *Life in a Mexican Village* (1951: 432-440), Lewis made the following six criticisms of the conceptual framework about its utility for studying culture change and cultural analysis (Miner, 1952).

- The folk-urban conceptualisation of social change focuses primarily on the city as a transformation agent to exclude or neglect other internal or external factors.
- Culture change may not be a matter of folk-urban progression. However, rather an increasing or decreasing heterogeneity of Spanish rural element, such as the plough, did not make Tepoztlan more urban but instead gave it a more varied rural culture.
- The typology involved in the folk-urban classification of societies tends to obscure the wide range in the ways of life, and in the value systems among so-called primitive peoples, the criteria used are concerned with the purely formal aspects of society. Focusing only on the formal aspects of urban society reduces all urban societies to a common denominator and treats them as if they all had the same culture. It should be clear that the concept “urban” is too much of a catchall to be useful for cultural analysis. Moreover, it is suggested here that the question posed by Redfield, namely, what happens to an isolated, homogeneous society when it comes into contact with an urbanised society, cannot possibly be answered because the question is too general and the terms used do not give us the necessary

data. We need to know what kind of urban society, under what conditions of contact, and a host of other specific historical data.

- The folk-urban classification has severe limitations in guiding field research because of the highly selective implications of the categories themselves and the relatively narrow focus of the problem. The emphasis upon essentially formal aspects of culture leads to neglect of psychological data and, as a rule, does not give insight into the people's character.
- Finally, underlying the folk-urban dichotomy as used by Redfield is a system of value judgments that contains the old Rousseauian notion of 'primitive' people as noble 'savages' and the corollary that civilisation has made man selfish. While folk societies are thought to be integrated, urban societies are thought to be responsible for disorganisation.

Sol Tax pointed out that world view can change folk society's independent characteristics without changing independent characteristics.

McKim Marriot

Robert Redfield conceptualised his idea based on the distinctions put forward earlier by European sociologists, such as *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tonnies) and mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim). Redfield (1955) formalised his ideas in the concept of the 'Little Community' with its four characteristics: smallness, distinctiveness, homogeneity, and self-sufficiency. Marriot, who was an American anthropologist, saw the interplay among the communities of rural and urban centres. In his essay on 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation' (1955), Marriot explicitly indicated the association between the caste system and the larger order of state and civilisation.

Marriot conducted his study in the village of Kishan Garhi, which is located in Uttar Pradesh. He talked about the Little Tradition and the Great Tradition and how cultural traits travelled from one society to another through universalisation and parochialisation. Marriot borrowed the concepts of the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition from Redfield's idea of the Great Community and the Little Community, which the latter had discussed while conducting his studies in Mexican communities. According to Redfield, the Little Community was a smaller size, self-sufficient and relatively isolated village. Redfield held that every civilisation is composed of traditions. On the one end are the traditions of 'elite' and 'thinking class' while there are traditions of unlettered peasants. The former emanated from urban centres, and their temples, educational institutions and was described as the Great Tradition. The concept may be understood from another angle. Every society consists of the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition. The traditions, behavioural patterns, customs and rites, rituals and festivals of these communities may be the Great and the Little.

In Indian society, Hinduism is the Great tradition, and it represents the way of life and shapes social structure. The source of this great tradition may be traced back to its ancient thinkers and philosophers and the scholarly works and epics and treatises. The Little Tradition is represented by numerous rural and tribal segments of Indian society.

McKim Marriott, influenced by the studies conducted by Robert Redfield for their intensive study of India's villages, elaborated the original model of Redfield in the light of data generated from Indian villages. Marriott envisaged two concepts: Parochialisation and Universalisation, with the two poles having been defined as the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition. Marriott characterised the mode of interaction between the Little and the Great Traditions in the Indian village as 'parochialisation' and 'universalisation. Universalisation, according to Marriot, refers to the carrying forward of materials that are already present in the Little Tradition. In other words, it is the upward journey of little traditions to become a part of great traditions. Parochialisation, on the other hand, is the downward devolution of the Great Tradition elements and their integration with the Little Tradition elements. It is a process of localisation. Thus, there is a continuous dialogue between elements of the Little and the Great Tradition.

Marriott's analysis is very illuminating, but one may argue that there is something more to be considered in studying modern India than the Great and the Little traditions; there is also the 'new tradition'. Morris Opler (1955:153) has argued that:

Marriott's conceptualisation leaves no room . . . for elements that are not aboriginal or local on the one hand or classical Indian on the other, but which come from without or which are invented by carriers of the culture. How the village will absorb and respond to these new ideas which sweep in from the West and the East or which are being generated in India today is perhaps even more important than how it copes with Sanskritic rites.

Opler's criticism is valid, but Marriott's study, nevertheless, has great merit. Through him, we are being helped to a viewpoint, a set of concepts, and a way of working that will allow anthropologists to study a village in its generic historic processes of interaction with the civilisation of which it is a part (Sharma, 1969). However, studying the interplay of the Great and Little Traditions or the advent of the "new tradition" within a village does not help understand the Indian culture. It may be true that 'to study Jonesville is to study America', but it is not true that 'To study Kishan Garhi, or Bisipara, is to study India.' To do this, social scientists should not limit themselves to the village as an isolate (ibid).

Check Your Progress

2. What is folk-urban continuum? Describe its features in detail.

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3. Discuss the contribution of Robert Redfield and McKim Marriot in the study of Indian villages.

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3.3 SEMI-URBAN AND PERI-URBAN

There are settlements which differ from cities as well as villages in configuration and function. It is not easy to describe such settlements. Sometimes we refer to these settlements as semi-urban or peri-urban areas. We come across two broader categories explicating the semi-urban condition. First, descriptive categories primarily try to develop analytical frameworks under one of the following captions: the urban-rural divide, the fringe, sprawl, and semi-urban landscapes. The second group corresponds to development or strategic categories for sustainable development, including garden cities, new urbanism, landscape urbanism, urban agriculture, neo-rurality, and ecopolis.

Peri-urban areas often lie outside the city's legal jurisdiction and sometimes even outside the legal jurisdiction of any urban local body. They are thus not provided with many of the essential services taken for granted in the city. They must make do on their own which results in increased local inequities as large companies and public institutions as the upper-income group can install privatised essential services. However, there is a complete absence of these services for the poor and more minor businesses/workshops. Electricity, for example, is often the first service to be provided by the government in peri-urban areas, but these areas generally lack piped water supply and residents obtain it from local rivers, lakes and ponds or through tube wells. Regarding sanitation, private homeowners and institutions in the peri-urban area create their facilities to build septic tanks and surface drains that empty into local streams or *nullahs* (Shaw, 2005).

Allen and Dávila (2002) defined a peri-urban interface as a mosaic of agricultural and urban ecosystems, subject to rapid change with a large social mix and measurable distinctive features (Allen, 2003). According to Adell (1999), peri-urban zones are dynamic, spatially and structurally, and form distinctive agricultural and non-agricultural activity areas.

Bourne (1996) stated that there is no clear border between suburbia and exurbia that contains edge cities and semi-agricultural, semi-urban landscapes. These landscapes were seen under urbanisation pressures as "nurtured landscapes", literally fed by the cities they enclose as peri-urban areas. In densely populated areas with extensive networks of cities and towns, the semi-urban landscape is enclosed by the city fabric and thus "nurtured" by multiple sources. Wolman et al. (2005) proposed the extended urban areas based on housing density and commuting patterns. Peri-urban areas could be situated within the larger metropolitan region and yet not have any essential services other than electricity, making them no different from the villages. However, unlike these villages, they face a more significant environmental burden stemming from their transition. The Desakota concept deserves to be mentioned here. Traditional theories relate the rapid growth of cities in third world countries to the fast depopulation of the countryside in the Southeast. In Asia, the rural population, living within the hinterlands of large (rapidly industrialising) cities, is spontaneously transforming their rural lifestyles into urban ones without

leaving their rural environments. In this approach, cities are not expanding, but the neighbouring countryside transforms 'itself' into a specific semi-urban fabric (Meuss, 2008).

Check Your Progress

- Write a note on peri-urban settlements.

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3.4 TOWNS AND TWO-TIER CITIES

In the developing world, towns are neither traditional in their form nor do they represent modern settlements. However, functionally they have similarities with both the city and the village. Towns have better links with their surrounding villages but have weaker inter-community ties and social life.

A town is a place where urbanity has not yet reached its full vigour. It may also sound relatively more minor in size by area and by the population residing within it. However, the concept is not fully clear simply by its demographic status or by its areal occupancy. There are unique small urban settlements within hills providing facilities or resorts.

Similarly, there are towns near or adjoining mining areas. These cannot fulfil the underlying concept involving functions of urban centre termed by urban geography as 'small town'. Population and areal occupancy may be components of town, but these do not carry the entire ecology of towns.

Up to Census 1951, the definition of a town included all habitations with more than 5000; every municipality/corporation/notified area of whatever size; and all civil lines not included within the municipal units. In 1961, this definition was changed. Furthermore, a town was defined as a settlement with a minimum population of 5,000 and a population density not less than 1,000 persons per square mile. Apart from this, 75 per cent of the working population should be engaged in non-agricultural activities. The town should have a few characteristics and civic amenities like transport and communication, banks, schools, markets, recreation centres, hospitals, electricity, and newspapers.

The above definition was in use till the 2001 census. All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board, or notified town area committee, a minimum population of 5,000, at least 75 percent of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km. The first category of urban units is called Statutory Towns. These towns are notified under the law by the concerned State/UT Government and have local bodies like municipal corporations, municipalities, municipal committees, irrespective of their demographic characteristics. The second category of towns is known as Census Town. These were identified based on Census 2001 data.

According to the government, cities with a population range of 50,000 to 100,000 are classified as tier 2 cities. This classification of Indian cities is a ranking system used by the Government of India. Cities are classified based on their population, as recommended by the Sixth Central Pay Finance. First-tier cities, national capitals or not, are usually larger than second-tiers. Second-tier cities are generally the capitals of states and other larger cities.

The relationship between small towns, the larger employment story and growth is significant. Small towns have remained an essential feature of the urban system. They might or might not account for a large share of the GDP, but they represent a large and growing market, and they also act as essential service centres to the rural population. In a context of limited rural to urban migration, job destruction in the agricultural sector and minimal job creation, places of adjustment where people cope with poverty, uncertainty through the mobilisation of their kinship networks and family resources. Economic activities range from: natural resource extraction; manufacturing; services and trade; real estate; and educational institutions. Moreover, the urbanisation of the peripheral settlements of large cities is not necessarily dependent on the city.

Check Your Progress

- 5. Discuss the idea of town and two-tier cities.

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3.5 SUMMARY

Human settlements and way of living are affected by geography and the resources at their disposal. Based on population density, development, amenities, employment opportunities, education, human settlement is divided into two categories, i.e. Urban and Rural. Urban refers to a human settlement where the rate of urbanisation and industrialisation is high. On the other hand, a rural settlement is one where the rate of urbanisation is relatively slow. However, these two types of human settlements are in constant and continuous interaction with each other. There exists both upward and downward flow of cultural traits between the urban and rural. Robert Redfield and McKim Marriot have proposed concepts to explain how a continuum exists between these societies and how traits are ‘universalised’ and ‘parochialised’. Apart from the urban and rural, newer forms of settlements have emerged. These are the semi-urban, peri-urban and suburban settlements.

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3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to section 3.2
2. Refer to section 3.3.
3. Refer to section 3.3.
4. Refer to section 3.4.
5. Refer to section 3.5.

