UNIT 3 SUSTAINABILITY TO SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Structure

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

The concept of social and biological environment has brought about the understanding of the interplay of culture and nature to the sustainability of human society. Nature has endowed rich resources to protect and support mankind. Culture acts as a means of existence in nature which is the product of adaptation by using particular technology and ideology in a given environment. Man as a member of society has experienced the contribution of the nature of culture to bring a balance in the process of existence and continuous interactional process. We cannot neglect or ignore either one of these aspects. There should be a harmony of these factors to strengthen the notion of balanced relationships and continuity in the structure of a society.

3.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the nature of society and culture;
- explain the structure and function of social stratification; and
- appreciate the diversity in culture.

3.2 NATURE OF SOCIETY

We have discussed in the above chapter the interactional pattern of man and environment through different aspects and understandings. This varies from society to society and culture to culture. However, the common characteristics of culture and society are called as nature of society and culture.

We would discuss the nature of society and its feasibility in achieving sustainability. The traits or nature of society is also like those of a living body with different structural features and behaviours. No two individuals are same likewise; two races are always different besides having some commonality. We can look at the nature of society and its evolution given by Herbert Spencer, a sociologist. He states that

- Society always evolves from a simple state to a complex state.
- There is a nature of progress or change from homogeneity to heterogeneity
- Society moves from lower to higher stages.

All these process of evolution or change is possible due to the nature of structure in a society which includes the following points:

- **Moral rules and norms:** Institutions and associations or groups which become important for social function are always governed by the set of rules and norms. It has been formed to follow and induct efficiently. Generally, changes in the society happen from simple to complex or lower to higher.

- **Division of labour:** Human society has high specializations and division of labour. Sometimes, it is found that male members are given priority in agriculture, decision making,etc. There are some societies where, boys have been assigned to stay in the youth dormitories till they learnt the various ways of knowledge, crafts and behaviours where, he can become a man of a family. Likewise, there are specializations in terms of age group, kinship relationships, locality, etc.

- **Customs and traditions:** It satisfies various needs and values of society. It is organized and repeated to contribute solidarity among the members. The traditions and customs make one to live with dignity and harmony.

- **Solidarity:** Feeling of interdependence and group consciousness brought the concept of solidarity and it is common in every society.

Society in India also has different systems. The nature of society from the Vedic Period to present has undergone various changes in structure and function. According to the norms and rules provided from time to time, in the ancient times there was division of labour with respect to education, occupation, public gatherings, etc. Customs and traditions such as child marriage, sati system and caste systems have undergone changes in due course of time. Every society has its nature of perception and delegation to the norms and values.

3.3 SOCIAL NORMS AND VALUES

There is always a standard set of rules and norms in a society which are expected by the members or individuals to obey or follow. And at the same time, there are some stigmas and taboos which should be restrained. Every activity ranging from eating to interactional behavior and generalizations are determined by norms. When such norms are functional, it becomes an action embedded with value that makes a society stable and united. Such actions governed by norms are handed over to generations in the form of customs and traditions making it alive and perpetual. These are responsible for the regulations of society and behaviours of

the fellow members. According to Emile Durkheim, a French Sociologist, it is hard to imagine the interactional pattern and exchange of goods amongst the strangers when we do not have norms (1983). In order to make norms efficient and effective, we need to make the rules fall into action. These norms are again governed by social values. Social values are considered as set of shared cultural norms and personal values that makes the social systems successful. In each social system, there is a hierarchy of value system or value hierarchy where each social system according to Talcott Parsons, another sociologist, is functioned by kinship, stratification, social power and religion. These four elements are mutually related and functionally, they belong to the dynamic process of social structure.

3.3.1 Social Stratification

The concept of social stratification includes norms regarding social groups and its basis of equality. To understand equality, inequality has been brought into the social structure and become a unit of measurement. Inequality is the basic unit of social stratification which makes some people higher than others. Each society has got a distinct culture and relationships distributed into different strata. As Weber said, man is an animal suspended in web of significance he himself has spun and in this light social stratification may be taken as a component of the web that helps man identify himself in terms of meaning, function and expression.

Social stratification can be broadly discussed as hierarchy based on inequality, beliefs and patterns, customs and traditions. It is universal and unique in each society. The common forms of stratification exist in the world are class and caste system. Class system is much more permeable and based on the personal wealth, occupation, education and family background. This keeps on changing and moving in due course of time. However, when we look at the Indian society, we have hierarchy dominated cultural system or commonly called caste system (*jati*) which is determined by birth or blood.

This system provides restrictions and limitations in the regulation of the society. Indian caste system and its peculiar norms of restriction such as occupation, status, commensality, inter-caste exchange relationships are very important in the functioning of its social structure. Caste system in each locality or area is well defined, the structure and function of this hierarchy is so interwined into the system that a reciprocity as well as mutuality develops whether one dominates or suffers. So, it is necessary in the social system to stabilize the web of relations or to provide a sustainable livelihood. However, at present, reference to caste system and its recognition mainly to the dominant and inferior status or caste as such have become much less because of its changing characters and acceptability. The social stratifications' structure particularly Indian caste system is changing and in this, there is a need to understand Andre Beteille's, idea of open stratification system or caste-free areas, the combinations, permutations of caste, class and power. The society continues with all these dynamic process and tries to make a continuity of it at the best level besides various influences and interferences such as development, globalization, etc.

3.3.2 Social Mobility

Social stratification and social mobility are mutually related and dependent on each other centering on certain value systems of the society. No society is static, as it undergoes various processes to meet the needs and wants of mankind. Social

mobility depends upon various factors, most important being social stratification which creates the condition to move in the horizontal or vertical direction. Several factors such as education, equal opportunities, openness, competition, new technical skills etc. motivated and encouraged people to achieve certain gains and mobility in the status, occupation, religion and so on. Such social mobility brought income variation and changes to the caste, class and power structure and divisions. Different status have different levels of consumption and behavior. Social mobility brought enough changes at the level of consumption and production level in the mass. Such changes in the social stratification (caste, class) create economic division and stratification which is totally different from the strict parental social hierarchy. One of the factors of social mobility i.e. nature or type of family also represents certain changes in the society. The traditional joint family structure which was taken as the pillar of strength in a family in terms of its ownership, responsibility, solidarity and resource management has changed into nuclear family. Nuclear family itself brings self consciousness, solidarity, responsibilities much more confined to few individual family members. The consumption rates of family based on the number of compositions vary however, the notion of production, consumption still continues in its own different ways.

Since independence, no uniform social stratification has come up in the Indian society and social mobility continues at different levels. Some of the social mobility is found to be quite common. Rural –urban mobility is also an example. In this, modern means of technological and industrial advancement and also education has attracted lots of people to the urban setting. This led to migration and overpopulation and expansion of urban set ups to a large extent that it became dangerous to nature and its resources. Many people move from one place to another especially from rural to urban in search of resources and opportunities for livelihood and existence. However, we can use the concept of folk-urban continuum of Robert Redfield signifying that rural – urban continuity exist providing the universalization of the culture. We can even take the process of Sanskritisation in understanding social mobility. Whether religious mobility or rural –urban or caste mobility particularly, the drive of income and status led to the changes in the thinking process of each and every individual. Such mobility always remained a continuous process. The process of assimilation and acculturation and sometimes culture shock also occurred during the social mobility. This could be understood thoroughly by understanding the nature of culture.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit

1) Explain Durkheim's nature of society and its evolution applying to your own society. Compare and contrast it with other societies giving emphasis on certain parameters.

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2) Define the term social stratification and mobility. Elucidate it in the context of Indian society.

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3.4 NATURE OF CULTURE

A culture is a process consisting of socially acquired knowledge and behaviors. Culture is a tradition which has been followed every moment by the members of society. The folklore tradition of dance and music in India occupies a great place in the rich heritage of India. The culture being a main component of the rich heritage of Indian culture becomes an integral whole where, every belief, law, moral, norms, values, traditions etc. have been included. This means that it includes everything from knowledge to any capabilities which according to Tylor is acquired by members of society. Culture is also like both sides of coin given that certain characteristics such as family, marriage etc. are common in each society while there are differences in the other spheres.

Each culture of a society tends to be similar in many aspects from one generation to the next. This continuity in the practice has been maintained by the process of enculturation which links the individual, culture and society. When an individual is born, he begins to learn various features of the society consciously or unconsciously. It consists of rewarding and punishing the children by older generation through training, instructions governed by the logic of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism always provides that one's culture remain as superior, good, the best than the others or the unknown giving bias notion of perceiving themselves superior to the extent that they sometimes live differently from the others. Such ideas give fallacy to the understanding of a culture. However the concept of cultural relativism propagates to understand the nature of culture more from the perspectives of a native point of view or beliefs rather than an outsider's point of view. Cultural relativism definitely provides the ethical understanding of different kinds of cultural pattern. So, every culture has cultural relativism supported by enculturation, ethnocentrism and diffusion. The diffusion or transfer of cultural trait(s) from one culture and society to another brought cultural similarities and differences from one to the other. It is clear that societies that are close in geographical and environment conditions have the tendency of successful diffusion and this process keeps each culture alive in one or the other form. However, this nature of culture cannot be justified by the appearance of similarity and process of diffusion through contacts and proximity. Rather, some cultural features have developed independent of the geographical and environmental conditions. They have never established contact with each other but invested similar tools or traits. It is also one of the criteria of uniqueness of culture. The nature of culture also includes mental thought and bodily behavior or pattern of activity and when taken into account these points, one must make it clear that it's an emic or an etic approach of understanding culture. The emic or native

participant's point of view and etic or the outside observer's point of view provides the mental and behavior aspect of culture into such a version that, sometimes even if these are different markedly in approach and interpretation, it represents the nature of culture. In addition to these, all cultures of the world share a universal pattern which is the socio-culturally recurrent aspects across cultures. It has included mainly infrastructure, structure and superstructure. These consist of modes of production, reproduction–domestic and political economy–and recreational activities.

3.5 DIVERSITY IN CULTURE

Besides the various forms of culture which are common to all culture and society , various factors and situations brought dissimilar cultural characteristics under the same geographical and environmental conditions or the neighbouring cultures or societies. These led to the establishment of different cultural constructs and practices giving varied culture and subcultures. The difference in the cultural components and nature opens to various conflicts as well as solidarity.

Mention may be made of a culture which has same environment but different ethnicity and cultural identity. Suppose if we take people of India as a group under tropical belt of Asia, we do find differences within it. This could be based on the further division of geographical environment or cultural division such as northern India, southern India, Western India, Central India, eastern India and north –eastern India. When we look further within each division for instance, you would find lots of differences amongst the north-eastern communities of India. They all have their own dialects and languages, cultures, social norms, traditions and customs different from each other (e.g. lineage pattern: matriliny and partiliny). Thus, the existence of the diversity of culture needs to be discussed and learned through various sources and experiences.

Cultural diversity is essential for the survival and continuity of human kind. It is also important specifically in the conservation of traditional indigenous cultures. The logic behind such understanding may be in short taken into account what has been given by the UNESCO Conference in 2001 under the article 1 that **"...***cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature***".** Different cultures have undergone changes from one generation to another due to group's response to environment and its interaction with the mankind, development, social changes, etc.

Cultural diversity and its existence have been affected by various factors of which globalization is one of the phenomena. Globalization helps either in the degeneration or generation of cultural diversity. Many scholars have different views in support of these two ideas and the two ideas have become debatable to understand culture.

3.5.1 Cross-Cultural Studies through Ethnographic Studies

Culture of each and every society has different ways of understanding, perceiving the world into its own terms. People from different parts of the world interpreted and dealt the framework of understanding the world according to their environment and cultural perspectives. We can't make water tight compartment of the characteristics of different groups of people according to the geographical

features but, we always come across various cultures and their ways of understanding the environment.

Hunter- gatherers are those who get their subsistence on the wild foods and resources. They live on a simpler mode of existence. However, they also live on other means other than hunting and gathering. Some of them engage in cultivation or trade with the neighbouring communities. The Nayaka people of Gir Valley, southern India have rice and coffee cultivation along with paid employment other than hunting and gathering. According to Bird David (1992), hunter gatherers tend to consume resources rather than storing for future use. But, it may also vary from one to another. He suggested the term procurement, to describe the relationship of hunter-gatherers and their environment. It could relate with economy which has connection with both cultural and technological components. The cultural components make one group distinct from the other. Their culture is not only collection of goods but also beliefs and sharing of knowledge to the understanding of the environment. Some of the well known hunter-gatherers of the world are the Eskimos, the Shoshone of the Great Britain, Pygmies of Africa, The Bushman of South Africa, The Australians, The Semangs of Malay Peninsula, and the Andaman Islanders. The best known techniques of these people vary in the relative elaboration and complexity. This could be considered in terms of its constitution, functions and ritual beliefs associated with and societal implications.

A detailed account of agriculture for subsistence could be explained by different cultures such as the Bemba and the East African tribes. Various grains, manioc, yam vegetables, mushrooms; ground nuts become the staple food. They practice it based on division of labour, focused on numerous religious rituals, ceremonies based on various belief systems. However, there are still some of the African communities who live on gathering and pastoral mode of production. The Amerindan or American Indians cultivated plants but is also supported by the products of hunting and food gathering. So, different communities of the world have different cultures of existence like gathering or agriculture along with various rituals and beliefs.

Likewise, people from Asia and its relative environment also have diversities in culture and practice various means of livelihood. The practice and degree of importance of the domestication of animals such as reindeer in northern Asia varies with regions, communities, clans and so on. Because, some have domesticated it for trade, for milk, for meat on ceremonial occasions, to drag sledges etc. Even within the boundaries of Indian Territory many areas have diverse cultural characteristics which could be similar as well as different. People are characterized by different religions and economic activities. Agriculture has been the main occupation of India in which shifting cultivation has been practiced by the Lepchs, the Baiga, the Nagas on the hill tracts along with certain cultural rituals and taboos. Government's attempt to bring and introduce settled agriculture made some areas of shifting into settled agriculture. Besides this, there are certain other communities who still live on hunting and gathering such as the Chenchus of south Hyderabad, the Andaman islanders. Some other communities like the Toda of Nilgiri Hills practiced pastoralism but shared lots of commodities with the neighboring communities where at present they engage in plantation as well as trade.

An interesting feature of the diversity of culture across the world could be discussed in relation to the community, the meaning and ways of livelihood.

Such cultural features through the process of assimilation and acculturation continue in different regions. This in turn gives both positive and negative impacts to the ecology of an area. For example, the culture of meat eating or non-vegetarianism in India also causes a cascading effect in the socio- cultural system of cultural adaptation. Earlier, majority of the people of India used to live more or less on vegetarianism but, coming up of new ideas from the west and modernization made the adoption of non-vegetarianism. It has become very common today and this act itself is a threat to environment as well as its natural resources. We can take the examples of the food habits of Zulu community of South Africa due to culture contact. Earlier they used to live on cattle and farming, milk and milk products, grains, meat, wild greens and millet etc. After the colonial government, diffusion from western diets and acculturation process, traditional food taboos and preferences, there were evidences of severe epidemics and various nutritional problems creating an imbalance in the sustainability of the environment. This led to resource scarcity and people modified their lifestyles and cultural systems. The introduction of agriculture and schistosomiasis in Egypt and its effect on its population in the early 60s explained the disturbances of ecological stability due to technological change or a change in their culture affecting humans adversely in the adaptive potential. With the process of modernization and globalization we live in many ways, local becomes global and vice versa. This process of change brought the culture of world community many advantages such as social security as well as many problems as threats to existence but, this process being a part of cultural adaptation offers various ways of dealing with it. It also offers our awareness of fragile ecosystem and its cultural values and how are we going to restore it to make a balance in nature and sustain it throughout generations.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit

1) Explain culture and discuss it from insider's perspectives with appropriate examples.

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2) Critically discuss the statement "*cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature*". Give examples.

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3) Explain the process of change and cultural adaptation across cultures. How is it linked with sustainability?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

- Society keeps on changing from time to time and the traditions and customs are kept alive by the established norms and values of the society which always pass from one generation to another.
- The social norms and values obligate the responsiveness to each member of society and brought the concept of solidarity amongst them.
- A society has been categorized into various strata to keep a balanced relationship with one another, to maintain a reciprocal mutual relationship. It is always expressed in the form of class or caste system. The caste system which is considered as the backbone of Indian society has divided the social groups into different types.
- Social mobility is dependent on various factors. It also passes through various stages and patterns. Some of the most common mobility is the rural-urban continuum, class structure and process of sanskritisation.
- People from the rural area move to the urban area in search of livelihood and this process of migration has helped in sharing and adopting culture trait, complexes and areas.
- Culture and its nature have been embedded in its process itself where, anything new has been adopted.
- The culture trait, complexes, areas and patterns are maintained and transferred through the process of enculturation and acculturation.
- The value of culture has also been strengthening by the concept of cultural relativism and various other factors like ethnocentrism, insider and outsiders perspectives, diffusion etc.

3.7 KEY WORDS

Solidarity : Integration of social relations in a society giving emphasis on unity.

Social Norms : It is a set of rules in a society which are expected to be followed by the members of the society.

Social mobility : The degree of one's position changing to another in the social hierarchy.

Enculturation : It is a conscious and unconscious process of learning the cultural pattern, knowledge, values and beliefs of an individual from his family and home. It starts from the birth of the individual till his death.

Ethnocentrism : It is a way of understanding culture where one's culture has been given the prime importance and others have been measured from it.

Cultural relativism : Each culture has its own beliefs and activities which should be understood from the perspectives of its own culture.

Ethnography : It is the descriptive account of the life of a group of people.

Culture shock : It is the state of anxiety when an individual enters a culture totally different from his own to which he is accustomed.

3.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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3.9 KEY TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Your answer must include the following points

   - Evolution takes place from simple to complex, heterogeneity to homogeneity; lower to higher stages of development.

- Comparison could be made on – division of labour, traditions and customs solidarity. All these are governed by norms and rules.

2) Your answer must include the following points

- Hierarchy of society on the basis of inequality, beliefs, traditions
- Based on education, occupation, birth etc.
- Restrictions and limitations of the authority.
- Social mobility becomes a process of flexibility, a degree of changing the status or position by virtue of various movements.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Your answer must include the following points

- Acquired knowledge which keep on passing from one generation to another
- Enculturation gives an account of familiarity.
- It is represented by the values of cultural relativism.

2) Your answer must include the following points

- A social significance to the continuation of mankind.
- Diverse culture: It is a useful tool to understand the ordered arrangement of a body.
- A framework to understand the reciprocal role relationship of continuity.
- Like biodiversity, cultural diversity deals in the conservation and protection of the mankind for a continuous sustainable lifestyle.

3) Your answer must include the following points

- Understanding of one's own society and environment through its cultural perspectives.
- Rigorous and continuous change study (Hunter- gatherer to pastoralism or agriculture and so on)
- Changes happen in course of time, adaptation in relation to space.
- A process which gives positive as well as negative impact to sustainability.