



LESSON 16 RURAL COMMUNITY PART-II

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16. RURAL COMMUNITY PART-II

16.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Social Structure of Rural Community
- Economic Structure of Rural Community
- Political Functioning in Rural Community

16.1 Introduction

A rural community is marked primarily by a small, sparsely settled, relatively homogeneous population that engages primarily in agriculture (although there are exceptions to this rule, especially in industrial societies). The traditional rural community tended to be a folk society. Robert Redfield (1941) describes the folk society as "a society, which is small, isolated, non-literate and homogenous with a strong sense of group solidarity...Behaviour is traditional, spontaneous, uncritical and personal; there is no legislation or habit of experiment and reflection for intellectual ends. Kinship, its relationships and institutions, are the type of categories of experience and the familiar group is the unit of action. The sacred prevails over the secular; the economy is one of status rather than of the market." Today, however, traditional rural community is losing its folk society character and flavour as described above.

Rural Social Structure

Village, community, family and caste are the basic components of the rural social structure. They encompass the entire field of life: social, economic, political and cultural life of the rural people. The complexity of social norms and values, statuses and rules, rights and obligations is reflected in them. These are long enduring rural social institutions which have millennia old historical roots and structures.

Rural social structure would refer to the inter-relationship, inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of the different parts of the rural society. Caste system is one unique social structure and the inter-relationship of the different units (castes) constitutes the structure of the rural society. Society, caste and Panchayat have control over the individual.



Caste System

Caste is the fundamental principle of social organizations in the Indian village. The structural basis of Hinduism is the caste system. Caste is also seen as a 'monopolistic guild'. The occupation on which a caste has monopoly may be very simple.

Village is conceptualized as an aggregate of castes, each traditionally associated with an occupation. The members of the caste are spread over a region in more than one village. The members of a caste have matrimonial relations with the neighbouring villages. Sometimes, the castes are also named after the corresponding occupations, e.g. caste, dhobi caste, chakali- washerwomen, Kammari- potters etc. Members of the caste marry within their own caste-but usually outside their village. In other words, the village is exogamous, while the caste is endogamous. There are some systems of marriage in which the men of upper castes marry women of lower castes allowing lower caste women to move up the hierarchy. **This is known as hypergamy, (anuloma). For political purposes, social control and matrimony, the members of the caste in a village are dependent upon their caste group located in other villages. Society, caste and Panchayat have control over the individual.**

It is also true that all caste occupations are not found in the village. A village has some castes – but for services it may depend on members belonging to various other castes from neighbouring villages. **Caste and class are linked to each other with high castes usually being associated with high castes usually being associated with higher classes. Class has an economic dimension. Upper castes are the landed, and lower castes are the landless, generally.**

Inter-caste Relations

Inter-caste relations at the village level constitute vertical ties. The castes living in a village are bound together by economic ties. **Generally peasant castes are numerically preponderant in villages and to perform agricultural work**, they need the services of carpenter, blacksmith and leather worker castes. It is unlikely that all castes are located within a village, consequently they depend on neighboring villages for certain services, skills and goods.

The term 'peasant' also shot into prominence with the works of Robert Redfield. For the first time, however, the term was defined in the writings of the American anthropologist, A.L. Kroeber. His oft-quoted definition of peasants is as follows: "Peasants are definitely rural – yet live in relation to market towns; they form a class segment of a larger population which usually contains also urban centers, sometimes metropolitan capitals. They constitute part-societies with part-cultures. They lack the isolation, the political autonomy, and the self-sufficiency of tribal populations; but their local units retain much of their old identity, integration, and attachment to soil and cults."



If tribes are isolated, peasants are not. They are agriculturalists – attached to soil, as Kroeber observes – who intend to produce primarily for their subsistence, but they have to produce a little more, because they do not manufacture and produce everything they need for their survival. They have to transfer and sell whatever little surplus they have to the markets located in urban areas so that they acquire the things they do not produce. Peasants are dependent upon urban markets, the consequence of which is that they are constantly in touch with urban societies. Therefore, for understanding them, we need to look at their relationship with the outside world of which they are a part. Kroeber's words that peasants are a 'part-society with part-culture' imply their constant interaction with other communities. The impact of these interactions can be seen on all the aspects of their life. Along with Kroeber, one remembers George Foster's words: 'Peasants constitute a half-society.'

Ideally, class and power, as said previously, are subordinated to caste. A Brahmin, even if poor, occupies the highest position in the caste hierarchy and commands unlimited respect from other castes. At one time, the Kshatriya kings wielded power, but the Brahmin priest officiated in the ritual that accorded them legitimacy to rule.

The producers of economic wealth, the merchant castes (the Vaishyas) pursue different wealth generating occupations, and are placed just above those whose jobs are principally menial, i.e. 'to serve the other three upper castes', as the classical texts put it. In some parts of India, there was a clear overlapping of the three ranked orders of caste, class, and power. For instance, both André Beteille and Kathleen Gough, in their respective studies of villages Sripuram and Kumbapettai, found that the Brahmins, who numbered around four per cent of the total population of South India, owned around ninety-eight per cent of the land, which they abstained from tilling because of religious injunctions that did not allow Brahmins to touch ploughs.

The Brahmins, who lived in their separate quarters called agharam, were also in control of political power. Therefore, being a Brahmin also meant occupying the highest position in class and power hierarchies. This was an example of what after Robert Dahl one would call 'cumulative inequality'. In this case, social status together with economic and political power are all concentrated in one group, the Brahmins. The typical 'Brahmin villages' of South India have also been locally called agharavadai.

Surely, not all the villages in India followed the pattern characteristic of villages in South India. In many other parts, the caste that controlled economic resources was certainly not of Brahmins, nor even of Kshatriyas. In Rampura, the Mysore village that M.N. Srinivas studied, the landowners were the peasants, the members of the caste called Vokkaligas. In North India, the principal landowners were and are the Jats. In such cases, economic stratification is independent of the other principles of ranking, and can in fact influence them. Thus, those who control political power



may also be the landowners. In this case, different ranked orders do not overlap; they rather exist independently. For such a system, one can use the term 'dispersed inequality', for the group that occupies the highest position in one ranking system is placed lowly in the other. Keeping this in mind, many sociologists make a distinction between 'ritual status' and 'secular status' – the former emerges from the caste, which is essentially a 'ritual hierarchy', while the latter emerges from the ownership of economic and political power. When these two statuses exist independently, it is a case of dispersed inequality; and when they overlap, it is cumulative inequality.

Gender Relations

The power relations are also closely related to the gendered location one has. Thus, in rural society women have less power in decision-making and their needs and concern do not seem to be well articulated at the household level and in the larger community. Their institutional presence is also considerably less as compared to men. These are compounded when class and caste are joined together.

Inter-caste relations are mediated by a system known as Jajmani System. Jajmani is sort of mutual give and take form of relationship in which one family is hereditarily entitled to supply goods and render services to the other in exchange of the same. The person rendering the services or supplying the goods is known as kameen or prajan and the person to whom the services are rendered is called a jajman. Thus under jajmani system a permanent informal bond is made between jajman and kameen to meet each other's need for goods and services. Exclusive and durable relations exist because when the family moves out it becomes its moral duty to find an alternative service provider for its patrons. These rights are also sold. Jajmani system is characterized by unbroken hereditary and multidimensional relationship based on barter system.

Family and Kinship Relations

Rural family functions as the unit of economic, cultural, religious and political activity. In agricultural societies the family becomes the unit of production, distribution and consumption. Marriage is a decision of the family governed by rules of kinship. Family has a strict control and administrative powers over the individual. Both nuclear and joint family with their modifications are found in rural India. There are Inter regional variations and in the distribution of family types. Currently the family is changing in rural India with changes in the social and economic situation. The family as a unit of production has changed more into a unit of consumption. Rules of marriage vary between South and North India.



16.3 Rural Economic Structure

The salient features of a rural economy are related to the conditions of agriculture that is the predominant economic activity. The rural sector consists of agriculture and non-agriculture related activities, which are known as farm and non-farm economy.

Agricultural Sector

The agricultural sub sector consists of agriculture and allied economic activities such as crop husbandry, animal husbandry, and dairying, fisheries, poultry, and forestry. The non-agricultural sector consists of economic activities related to industry, business or services. This refers to the cottage and village industries, khadi, handloom, handicrafts etc. Business refers to micro enterprises, trading of general goods, small shops petty traders etc, whereas services refer to transport, communication banking and input supply, marketing of farm and non- farm produce etc. The main stakeholders of rural sector include farmers- agricultural and non-agricultural laborers, artisans, traders, money lenders and those engaged in providing such services as transport, communication, processing, banking and education and extension.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Indian economy because of its high share in employment and livelihood creation notwithstanding its reduced contribution to the nation's GDP. The share of agriculture in the gross domestic product has registered a steady decline from 36.4 per cent in 1982-83 to 18.5 percent in 2006-07. Yet this sector continues to support more than half a billion people providing employment to 52 per cent of the workforce. This means that the share of the value of goods and services produced by the agricultural sector has diminished much more than the decline in the number of people depending directly on the activities of this sector.

It is also an important source of raw material and demand for many industrial products, particularly fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural implements and a variety of consumer goods. Growth of agriculture over a period of time remained lower than the growth in non-agriculture sectors. The gap between the growth of agriculture and non- agriculture sector began to widen since 1981-82, and more particularly since 1996-97, because of acceleration in the growth of industry and services sectors.

Dry Land Agriculture

Dry land agriculture is usually unaccounted for in mainstream agriculture. In India, it is estimated that 410 million people depend on the dry lands for a living. Dry land



agriculture is another economy in rural areas that closely enmeshes with the 'poverty geography' of the country. Other than the arid zones where even rainfed farming is quite difficult, the heart of the drylands is in the semi-arid zones. Drylands in this country constitute more than 70% of the cultivable lands and despite several odds stacked against them, produce about 42% of the country's food. It is reported that nearly 83% of sorghum, 81% of pulses and 90% of oilseeds grown in the country come from these areas.

Rural livelihood systems in dry lands are usually a mix of natural resource based, non natural resource based and migrant incomes. These have tended to persist over several decades without any change because of the policy focus on green revolution. The nature of agricultural strategy underwent significant changes in the early plans to the current. These have important implications for promoting rural livelihood base. Strategy of green revolution and spread of irrigation was emphasized.

Much of the technologies, subsidies and public support systems provided under this undifferentiated agriculture policy fail in responding to the needs or problems of dry land agriculture, thus promoting inequity, whether we examine input support (irrigation, fertilizers, seeds) or out-put support (minimum support price and procurement price mechanisms). A similar tendency is visible in terms of agriculture research priorities, technology development and investments.

Allied Agricultural Activities

Animal husbandry and horticulture, pisciculture, apiculture and sericulture are examples of allied activities which are closely related to agriculture and provide marginal or substantial source of income for rural communities.

Non-agricultural Activities

This sector in rural areas constitutes an important component of the rural work force constituting 20 to 25% of the rural work force. This includes manufacturing of implements and work of artisans and crafts persons that support the agricultural work.

Rural industries that fall into the Khadi and village industries serve as an important support for employment. Also some of the people are employed in rural services such as health, education and the markets. In 2001 the workers in rural industries accounted for 3.8% of the rural work force and above 3% for the total workforce of the country.

Basic features of rural economy are:

1) Excessive dependence on Nature: With 64% of the net sown area in 1993-94 was rainfed that is crop production depended on the quantum and distribution of



rainfall over the growing season. Indian agriculture is vulnerable to natural calamities, such as droughts, floods, hailstorms, and cyclones. This means that the degree of nature induced risk and uncertainty in agriculture is higher than in the non- agricultural sector, with the burden of risk falling on the farmer.

2) Low capital labour ratio: This refers to the amount of capital available per worker. As there is a large workforce depending on agriculture this makes the capital available per capita low.

3) Small economic holdings and livestock holdings: The existing land inheritance law means that the process of subdivision and fragmentation of landholdings continues unabated affecting generation after generation. Almost all the marginal and small farmers are poor, producing very little marketable surplus. It is estimated that the farmers having less than four hectare of land are not financially viable. Thus over 90% of farms in India are not financially viable. Compounded with this is the factor of continued low returns which is making the cultivators to join the ranks of agricultural labour.

4) Low factor productivity: There is low average crop yields per hectare compared to other nations. The inadequate capital in the form of production of inputs, raw material and improved machinery and equipment available per worker/unit of enterprise.

5) Long gestation and low rate of turnover: The gestation period for investments in agriculture is long compared to non-agricultural enterprises. Three to four month period for crops to mature, six years for a calf to the stage where milk production is possible, and in horticulture the fruit tree takes about 5-10 years for bearing fruit. Longer time is taken for a return on investment.

6) High incidence of poverty and unemployment: The poverty in terms of absolute numbers as per official figures is 22%. But the incidence of poverty and the conditions for the above poverty line to turn into poverty situations are plenty. There is increasing rural debt experienced even by the rich farmers specially those in the cotton belt.

The uncertainties unleashed by the economic reforms make the poor suffer more. Low skills are compounded by low work availability. Similarly unemployment conditions are increasing.

7) Preponderance of illiterate and unskilled workforce: The labour force in rural areas is less skilled because of the disadvantaged class and caste status. They are unable to complete basic schooling. Both individual and collective structural factors make it difficult for the labour force to acquire skills required to move them from primary sector to the secondary and tertiary structures.



8) Lack of basic infrastructure: Basic infrastructure in terms of connectivity and health and education facilities as also market facilities related to cold storage, etc are still to be achieved in adequate numbers and quality. Credit is required in rural areas for consumption and production purposes. Consumption needs require small amounts of credit that meet needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education and health. Credit requirements are usually met from the shaukar/money lender informal institutions. However there is increasing evidence that the growing SHG movement in several parts of the country especially south is able to make inroads into traditional money lending institutions. Their share is less but growing.

16.4 Political and Economic Connections

Political power centered in cities controls villages. The conflicts between different people pertain mainly to the matters of land disputes, traditional power arrangements, sharing of common resources such as the community pastures, water and forest resources and transgressing caste boundaries.

Panchayats are usually the forums for dispute resolution. There are two types, one the Village Panchayat and the other Jati Panchayat. The former deals with the welfare of the families living in that village undertaking collective tasks of the village such as performing rituals for the welfare of the entire village or organizing programs for the collective welfare such as building tanks, roads, granary. A traditional caste council called Panch or five, comprises of a small but always an odd number, deals with issues related to caste matters and inter-caste relations. A particular caste is dominant implying either a numerical predominance, or control over economic resources, political power or having a high ritual status, or first ones to take advantage of the Western Education system.

Lower castes are often reduced to a marginal status. The dominant castes have often resorted to violence to keep other castes submissive. The power of the Panchayat is being reduced by the presence of the secular formal institutions, of the dominant castes. There is also conflict between the traditional caste Panchayats and the secular institutions such as the Gram Panchayat. Class has an economic dimension. **Upper castes are the landed, and lower castes are the landless, generally.**

The power relations are also closely related to the gendered location one has. Thus in rural society women have less power in decision-making and their needs and concern do not seem to be well articulated at the household level and in the larger community. Their institutional presence is also considerably less as compared to men. These are compounded when class and caste are joined together.



16.5 Conclusion

Rural community is known for its smallness, homogeneity, simplicity, traditional means for regulation, group solidarity etc. It is natural ecological entity. Indian village community is known for its autonomous character. It is also itself considered as a little republic. But in the era of globalization traditional rural communities have been changed, new social structure is visible in rural areas. Today rural community is a blend of tradition and modernity. As a sociologist it's our task to study rural relations and transformation for development of human beings.

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