



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## INDIAN CUSTOMS AND SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT



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Based on the fossil evidence, it is estimated that the age of man in India is approximately five lakh years. Even though numerous academics have attempted to piece together the early occupants of India and their racial and ethnic affiliations using their classifications, it remains a challenging task. Our understanding of the development of Indian society has been largely based on the rise of the earliest known civilization, which dates back roughly 5,000 years, and the advent of writing.

Indian society is extremely complicated by nature. Given its lack of some fundamental characteristics, Indian society may not even remotely qualify as "society" in the literal sense of the world. Individuals living in a single region under a state want to maintain social unity, which was a diverse endeavour in India prior to 1947 rather than a monolithic one. India has a rich history of diverse tribes, ethnic groups, and Jatis, each with their own unique customs and traditions. These groups were largely isolated from one another, except for interactions between warriors, pilgrims, and traders. It was only after the formation of the Indian Union that these groups began to interact and integrate more closely. Thus, it is societies in India with a mind boggling multiplicity that were living and the aggregate of which most of us prefer to describe as Indian Society. All these hundreds and thousands of societies were hampered in their interactions because of lack of any commonly understood language and culture.

Even though there is a great deal of cultural diversity, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new forces and factors have emerged, leading to an increasing convergence of civilizations. The establishment of "Indian society" can be attributed to a number of factors, including a single political structure, a common legal system, a uniform administrative and educational framework, increasing economic interdependence, and a new type of rising national consciousness.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Culture, Peasant Society, Caste System.*



## INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural dynamics, to put it broadly and loosely, are the ways in which a society's social and cultural characteristics change over time. Social refers to the structural elements, such as patterned relationships, even if social and cultural traits are considered as an entire totality and are therefore inseparable. Through a variety of social institutions, we come into contact. The beliefs, concepts, and symbols that human groups share collectively are referred to as cultural qualities. Therefore, socio-cultural dynamics is an ageless and global process. All societies go through this process of change at all times since no society can remain stagnant.

Another significant aspect of socio cultural dynamics is the way that the modern west has affected Indian society and culture. India has always been a very traditional country, and the country's modernization both technologically and culturally was only brought about the interaction with the contemporary west. These alterations have been characterised by sociologists as a hetrogenetic process of change. Furthermore, despite the fact that the Portuguese, French, and Dutch also had interactions with India, Indian society was greatly impacted by British influence. We need to grasp the characteristics of Indian culture and western tradition in order to comprehend the socio-cultural dynamics in relation to the influence of the West. In terms of utilitarianism, individualism, and rationality, western culture was modernising, whilst Indian culture was quite traditional.

English language instruction and secular education were two major effects of the West. Sanskrit, Persian, and Urdu were the official

languages used in India for administrative and governmental work prior to the arrival of British administration. They introduced English language and it provided a window to the outside world. It also facilitated exposure to a new value system based on egalitarianism, rationalism and secularism. Introduction of new and modern means of transport and communication contributed to increase in spatial and social mobility. The new printing technology, postal services and radio helped in the dissemination of ideas. The introduction of a new penal code not only brought about the changes in the legal system and distribution of justice; it directly attacked the traditional discriminatory Hindu law which was highly discriminatory and unjust especially for the dalit sections of Indian society. The principle of 'equality before law' was established along with a uniform legal system throughout India. Industrialization and urbanization- important factors of change-registered a sharp rise. The process of industrialization facilitated new determinants of social status and secular indicators of social status such as material indicators were introduced to the Indian society. The concept of 'nationalism' gradually emerged and it played an important unifying role in Indian society.

It is important to note that the impact of westernization also facilitated the emergence of a new westernized elite that replaced the traditional elite of Indian society. These new elite equipped and inspired by a new ideology and value system looked at its own 'society' in a different way. It re-interpreted way and became a harbinger of a new social order. Thus, the impact of westernization, immensely contributed to the technological and cultural modernization of India.



India may be described as a nation of villages. It has around six lakh villages and more than 70% of Indian population lives in villages. All of these villages are not similar. These may be classified into different types such as (i) Nucleated villages, commonest all over India, with a tight cluster of houses surrounded all over India, with a tight cluster of houses surrounded by the fields (ii) Linear settlements where houses are strung out, each surrounded by its own compound. There is a little to physically demarcate where one village ends and another begins (iii) Scattering of homesteads or clusters of two or three houses where physical demarcation is not clear. Besides these and other types, size of population and density of population may also represent important type.

Further, India's villages portray an overwhelming diversity of form, style, custom and ritual. Each is a product of a long evolution, an overlapping of separate peoples and cultures over a period of thousands of years. Contemporary Village India is a mirror of its past.

The main components of rural social structure in India have been and still are, despite social change, family and kinship caste, class and village. Several sociologists while describing village India talk about caste, joint family and village community as forming a trinity. However, on a wider plane, we look at such social institutions rooted in recorded history as described above are longest enduring. The all pervading nature of these social institutions may be observed in all the spheres of life-social, cultural, economic, and political. We get their reflection in social norms, and values, roles, rights and obligations. Within India's rural social structure

family, usually joint family, functions as unit of economic, socio-cultural, political and religious domains.

When we examine the essential nature of India's villages the issue of 'village autonomy' immediately comes to the fore. This has been a controversial issue. Among the earliest scholars, Henry Maine (1881), Charles Metcalfe (1833) and Baden Powell (1896) laid emphasis on the notion of village autonomy in an exaggerated manner. The Indian village was portrayed as a closed and isolated system. The later researches done by the historians, sociologists and social anthropologists have demolished this myth. The Indian village was never self-sufficient. It always maintained links with the larger society and centres of Indian civilization. Migration and movement for work trade, village exogamy, administrative linkages, inter-regional markets, inter-village economic ties, caste network, pilgrimage, fairs and festivals and other activities always served as bridges with the neighbouring villages and the larger society.

During later years new forces of modernization further expanded the inter-village and rural-urban interaction. This has been described by Oscar Lewis (1955) as 'Rural Cosmopolitanism'. But despite the increasing external linkages village remains, by and large, a fundamental social unit and people living in a village have a sense of common identity and loyalty.

Social stratification as a field of study and research occupies important place in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science, economics and psychology. Further, the most appealing of all utopias is (total) equality and hence study of social stratification has been and still is one



of the most fascinating fields of study in different social sciences.

The term 'social stratification' has been borrowed from geology and it refers to the division of people into layers of strata which may be thought of as being vertically arranged in the same way that layers of the earth are arranged above or below other layers. But this geological metaphor has its own limitation. As rightly pointed out by Andre Beitel (1985), "the arrangement of persons in a society is enormously more complex than the arrangement of layers of the earth; and social strata are not visible, to the naked eyes in the way the geological strata are".

When we talk of social stratification we draw attention to the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. Broadly speaking, social stratification refers to the division of society. Broadly speaking, social stratification refers to the division of society into a number of strata, hierarchically arranged groupings. These groupings have assumed numerous historical and cultural variations, of which castes, estates and classes are the most familiar.

'Caste' has come to be associated with the social science concept. The phenomenon which we now call 'caste' was named by western observers of India at an early stage in the colonial period. The phenomenon of caste has probably aroused more controversy than any other aspect of Indian life and thought. Some scholars see India's caste system as the defining feature of 'Indian culture'. Caste is such a complex phenomenon that it is difficult to define and the definitions pose lot of problems. Although "it reflects economic inequalities, by virtue of the occupations typically followed by, or permitted to

members, caste stratification is ultimately rooted in non-economic criteria. In its purest form, in Hindu India, the caste principle is religious. Castes are ranked in accordance with the degree of 'ritual purity' ascribed to members and their activities (David Jary and Julia Jary, 1991). Historically, the most developed form, and some would argue the only true form, of caste stratification has occurred in India in association with Hinduism. The origins of this system are obscure. They probably lie in the twin bases of ethnicity and occupational specialization. The system which the Brahmins perfected was founded on five main divisions, four caste groups (Varna) and an out caste group (Pancham Varna), the untouchables. The four caste groups were the Brahmins, the priestly class having religious authority, the Kshatriyas the secular and military ruler and landlord caste, the Vaishyas the mercantile middle class and the Shudra- the servants and the slave's class. The untouchables performed only the most degrading and ritually impure/polluting tasks.

Caste is a system of stratification. To be more precise, caste system is a system of social stratification in the Indian society. It represents the basic idea or notion or ideology of social stratification in the traditional Indian system. Sociologists, sometimes take divergent views of caste. Two most popular of such views are (i) Cultural view and (ii) Structural view. The differences in these two views lie not in the basic content but in the levels of analysis.

Those who tend to take the cultural view of caste treat it as a system of ideas and values. It may also include beliefs and norms. In this view, the most important factor is hierarchy, which forms the basis of ranking of persons or groups. Among those who



are protagonists of this view, the prominent ones are Louis Dumont, G.S. Ghurye, Edmund Leach, and M.N. Srinivas. They look at caste as a social or cultural phenomenon peculiar to the Indian society, more precisely to the Hindu society because among the non-Hindus it does not constitute the religious ideology despite the fact that they have also developed 'caste like' stratification. Treating caste as a cultural phenomenon within the general principle of social stratification, they pinpoint hierarchy of hereditary groups as its basis. These hereditary groups are separated by caste endogamy, restrictions on commensal relations (exchange of food and water) and physical contact. But despite this separation and exclusiveness they are interdependent because of the traditional division of labour. The underlying principle of this arrangement is based on the opposition of the pure and impure, a sort of binary opposition.

Yogendra Singh makes further elaboration of this arrangement. He talks of universalistic or particularistic categories. The former means that caste system is regarded as just another manifestation of the universal phenomenon of social stratification while latter means that caste system may be viewed as a system of stratification, which is unique to the Indian/Hindu society.

Yogendra Singh again divides the proponents of this view into two categories: Structural Universalistic and Structural Particularistic. For structuralists, caste system is nothing but the representation of class relations in caste idiom. The religious sanctions behind caste have been interpreted by Marxists as simply a legitimizing ideology to sustain the existing mode of production. Since the landed castes are

mostly upper castes who largely control the means of production and exploit the 'ritual inferior' landless lower castes, the dye is cast in favour of its interpretation in terms of class in the Marxian sense of term. Majority of sociologists studying the Indian society have subscribed to the structural particularistic view of caste. They have treated caste as an institutionalized system of interaction among the hierarchically ranked hereditary groups for marriage, occupation, economic division of labour, enforcement of cultural norms and values by caste panchayats or organizations. Structural analysis of caste views it as a system of institutionalized inequality. Thus Caste may also be understood as the structural basis of inequality.

Dalits in India have been socially and economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically subordinated or marginalized for centuries. They have now begun to articulate their identity asserting not only equality for themselves but also struggling to bring their revolutionary changes in the social order based on equality and liberty. Thus, dalit identity conveys their aspirations and quest for a new social order.

Peasant Movement and agrarian struggles continue to be one of the central themes of the 'old movement study tradition of sociology and social anthropology in Indian Systematic interests in peasant movements can be traced back to the 1960s largely because it was a period when the 'agrarian question' and unequal distribution of land in the 'Third World' were prominent political issues. Peasants came to represent a possible alternative revolutionary subject (Alavi, 1965). However, Erick Stokes (1978) finds that peasant rebellions look



strangely absent in Indian society. This situation is attributed to the peculiar Indian social structure, i.e. the caste system and the village structure. However, the 'passive' and 'docile' character of Indian peasants has been challenged by Kathleen Gough (1974), A.R. Desai (1979), D.N. Dhanagare (1983) and others. They argue that the historians have overlooked a number of peasant rebellions before and during the British rule. Furthermore, according to Andre Beteille (1974), the areas with larger number of agrarian revolts are predominantly rice-producing regions. These regions not only have large proportion of agricultural labourers but land is unequally divided among the cultivators.

Peasant movements in India are generally classified in terms of pre-British/pre-Colonial, British/Colonial and post independence periods. In terms of classification, A.R. Desai (1986) classifies colonial India into ryotwari areas under British territory, Zamindari areas under princely authority, and tribal regions.

Changes in Culture and society are one of the major theoretical pre-occupations of sociology and social anthropology and one of the areas where theoretical differences manifest themselves most clearly. Social change is any alteration in the cultural, structural, population, or ecological characteristics of a social system such as society. In a basic sense, attention to social change is inherent in all sociological work simply because social systems are always in the process of change. Man and his social institutions have evolved through time. In this course, both man and his social institutions have undergone changes. Talking about social change in India, Yogendra Singh (1996) expresses the view that

social change may also be looked at as ideology. "Emphasis on the uniqueness of Indian society emerges from a confusion of levels, institutions, customs and cultural forms and its conceptual abstractions which constitute the basis of sociological categories".

Contemporary Indian society is changing rapidly. This change is taking place both in its structure and functioning. Social institutions and values are changing in India. This will affect everyone especially the Hindus whose way of life is very largely dependent upon a trio of social institutions viz, Caste, Joint Family and Village Community, which are changing in important respects.

India has always been described as a traditional society in which (i) the status of a person is determined by birth and is fixed, that is individuals do not strive for social mobility, (ii) individuals behaviour is governed by customs and ways of behaviour of people vary slightly from generation to generation, (iii) social organizations is based on hierarchy, (iv) individual identifies himself with primary groups and kinship relations predominate in interaction, (v) people are conservative, (vi) economy is simple and economic productivity above subsistence is relatively low and mythical thought predominates in society.

But this description does not portray the totality of the present Indian society

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