

EXPLORING THE VIBRANT INTERSECTION OF SOCIETY AND LIFESTYLE IN INDIA

Dr. Sharanappa K C

Assistant Professor

Department of PG Studies in Sociology,
Government Arts College (Autonomous), Chitradurga, Karnataka state, India.

E-mail Id: sharansneha123@gmail.com

Abstract : India, a land of remarkable diversity, presents a tapestry of social life rich in variations that extend across myriad dimensions. The country is a melting pot of diverse ethnicities, languages, regions, economic strata, religious beliefs, social classes, and caste affiliations. This intricate web of society is further characterized by stark urban-rural disparities and distinctions based on gender norms. Notably, the differences between the northern and southern regions of India carry profound significance, particularly evident in the realms of kinship systems and marital traditions. The societal structure of India unfolds as a mosaic of complexities unparalleled by any other civilization, resembling more a continent like Europe rather than a singular nation-state. Moreover, the contemporary Indian landscape is undergoing rapid transformations that impact various regions and social classes in distinct ways. Despite the intricacies of Indian life, there exist overarching cultural motifs that foster social cohesion and maintain order within the diverse social fabric. The paper represents the themes in Indian Society, Family and Kinship, and Caste and Class Varna, Caste, and Other Divisions and their sub-components.

Keywords: Society, Indian society, Urbanization, Rural society, Indian society, Family, Caste, Class, Varna and social divisions

1.0 Introduction

India showcases an incredible range of diversity in almost every aspect of social life. The country is home to numerous ethnic, linguistic, regional, economic, religious, class, and caste groups, all of which contribute to the rich fabric of Indian society. This diversity is further complicated by significant differences between urban and rural areas, as well as various gender dynamics that shape everyday life. The contrast between north India and south India is particularly noteworthy. These regions not only differ in language and cultural practices but also in their systems of kinship and marriage traditions. For example, marriage customs can vary widely, reflecting local values and social structures. People in these areas may approach family and relationships differently, highlighting the complexity of social interactions across India. Indian society is multifaceted in a way that is perhaps unmatched by other major civilizations. It resembles a collection of diverse regions, much like the countries of Europe, rather than a single uniform nation-state. Each region has its own unique practices, beliefs, and lifestyles, which all coexist under the broader umbrella of Indian culture. In addition to historical diversity, contemporary Indian culture is influenced by rapid changes affecting different regions and socioeconomic groups. Urbanization, technological advancement, and globalization impact social norms and practices in distinct ways. What is true for one community may not hold for another, leading to a dynamic cultural landscape. Despite these intricate layers and differences, there are widely accepted cultural themes that often promote social harmony and order. Common values, rituals, and traditions help to create a sense of unity among the diverse groups within India. These shared elements allow individuals from different backgrounds to find common ground and coexist peacefully. The interplay of diversity and shared cultural themes makes India a unique and vibrant society.

1.1 Hierarchy: India is characterized by a hierarchical structure. This ranking system permeates various aspects of life across the country, whether in the northern or southern regions, among Hindus or Muslims, and in urban or rural settings. Despite being a political democracy, the ideals of complete equality are rarely reflected in everyday interactions. Asia Society in India Asia Society India offers a diverse range of insights into contemporary Asia, fostering a deeper understanding of Asia-Pacific issues through various programs, including lectures, policy discussions, musical events, and film presentations. Learn More The social landscape of India is marked by remarkable diversity in nearly every facet of life. The presence of societal hierarchy is evident in caste systems, individual standings, and family dynamics. While castes are predominantly linked to Hinduism, similar group structures can also be found among Muslims, Christians, and other religious communities. In most villages and towns, the relative status of each caste is well-known, influencing social interactions and behaviors. Individuals are also assessed based on their wealth and influence. For instance, those in positions of power, often referred to as "big men," may sit comfortably in chairs, while those of lesser status, or "little men,"

approach them either standing or squatting, refraining from sitting alongside someone of higher rank. Hierarchy is similarly significant within family and kinship structures, where men typically hold a higher status than women of the same age, and older relatives are prioritized over younger ones. In northern India, for example, a daughter-in-law is expected to show respect to her husband, senior in-laws, and all daughters in the household. Sibling relationships also reflect this hierarchy, with younger siblings addressing their older counterparts using respectful titles rather than their names.

1.2 Purity and Pollution: In Indian society, distinctions in status are often articulated through the concepts of ritual purity and pollution, which are intricate ideas that differ significantly across various castes, religious affiliations, and geographical areas. Typically, higher social status correlates with purity, while lower status is linked to pollution. Certain forms of purity are innate; for instance, an individual born into a high-ranking Brahmin caste possesses a greater degree of inherent purity compared to someone from a lower-ranking sweeper caste. Other forms of purity are more fleeting; for example, a Brahmin who has recently bathed is considered more ritually pure than one who has not bathed for an entire day. Ritual cleanliness is a key aspect of purity, encompassing practices such as daily bathing in flowing water, wearing freshly laundered garments, consuming only caste-appropriate foods, and avoiding physical contact with individuals of significantly lower status or with impure materials, such as human waste. Engagement with death or violence-related activities is generally regarded as ritually polluting. Social Interdependence A prominent theme in Indian culture is the concept of social interdependence. Individuals are born into various groups—families, clans, subcastes, castes, and religious communities—and often feel a profound connection to these groups. The fear of isolation, lacking social support, is a significant concern for many. Psychologically, family members typically share a strong emotional bond. Economic activities are also intricately woven into this social fabric. Through numerous kinship connections, individuals are linked to relatives in nearby and distant villages and towns. Almost anywhere one goes, there is likely to be a relative available for moral and practical assistance. Social connections play a crucial role in facilitating activities, while their absence can lead to challenges. Rarely do individuals undertake even the simplest tasks independently. For instance, when a small child eats, it is common for the mother to feed the child directly with her own hand.

2.0 Family and Kinship

2.1 Family Values: The core aspects of Indian cultural life are deeply rooted in family dynamics. The joint family system is highly esteemed, ideally comprising multiple generations living, working, dining, and worshipping together. This structure includes men connected through the paternal line, along with their spouses, children, and unmarried daughters. Typically, a wife resides with her husband's family, although she maintains significant ties to her own family of origin. Despite the rapid modernization of India, the traditional joint household continues to serve as the primary social unit for many Indians, both in theory and in practice. Large families are often adaptable and well-suited to contemporary Indian society, particularly for the over two-thirds of the population engaged in agriculture. In agricultural communities, cooperative kinship provides essential economic stability. The joint family model is also prevalent in urban areas, where familial connections can be vital for securing employment or financial support. Notable families, such as the Tatas, Birlas, and Sarabhais, maintain joint family structures to collaboratively manage their extensive business interests. While the traditional ideal of the joint family remains influential, actual living situations today are diverse. Many Indians reside in nuclear families—consisting of a couple and their unmarried children—yet are part of robust networks of supportive kinship. It is common for groups of relatives to live in close proximity, readily fulfilling their familial responsibilities. As joint families grow, they often split into smaller units, which can evolve into new joint families, perpetuating a continuous cycle. In the modern context, some family members may relocate to pursue job opportunities, frequently sending financial support back to the larger family unit.

2.2 Family Structure and Cohesion: In Indian households, the hierarchy and authority are distinctly established, with behavioral ideals playing a crucial role in sustaining family cohesion. All members are socialized to recognize and accept the authority of those positioned above them in the family structure. The eldest male serves as the head of the family, while his wife oversees the daughters-in-law, with the youngest holding the least power. In return, those in positions of authority are expected to fulfill the needs of other family members. Loyalty to the family is a core value, and the importance of family unity is highlighted, particularly in contrast to individuals outside the family circle. Within the home, the relationships between spouses and between parents and their children are often downplayed to foster a broader sense of family harmony. For instance, public displays of affection between husbands and wives are generally viewed as inappropriate. Historically, men have held control over significant family assets, such as land and businesses, particularly among higher-status groups. According to traditional Hindu law, women were not entitled to inherit real estate, making them dependent on their male relatives who managed these resources. In contrast, under Muslim customary law, women can inherit property, although their shares are typically less than those of men. Recent

legislation has granted all Indian women the right to inherit real estate. Traditionally, in families with sufficient means, women have managed some wealth through valuable jewelry.

2.3 Veiling and Women's Seclusion:

A notable element of Indian family life is purdah (derived from Hindi *parda*, meaning "curtain"), which involves the veiling and seclusion of women. In many regions of northern and central India, especially in rural settings, both Hindu and Muslim women adhere to intricate rules regarding body veiling and limiting public appearances, particularly in the presence of in-laws and unfamiliar men. The practices of purdah are closely associated with the dynamics of authority and harmony within the family. While there are distinct differences in purdah practices between Hindus and Muslims, the emphasis on female modesty and decorum remains a common thread.

2.4 Life Transitions:

The arrival of a newborn is marked by ceremonies of welcome and blessing, which are often more elaborate for boys than for girls. Despite India's rich history of influential women, including the notable leadership of Indira Gandhi, and the widespread veneration of goddesses in Hindu practices, statistics indicate that girls face significant disadvantages in the country. The 2001 Census revealed a ratio of only 933 females for every 1000 males, a figure influenced by sex-selective abortions, inadequate healthcare and nutrition, and instances of female infanticide. Parents tend to prefer sons due to their perceived higher value in agricultural work and the expectation that sons will remain with their families to provide support in later years. Conversely, daughters are seen as a financial burden, particularly due to the substantial dowries often required at marriage. In recent years, dowry demands have escalated significantly in certain communities. Marriage is considered a crucial milestone for nearly everyone in India, representing a pivotal moment in an individual's life. In much of northern and central India, marriages are typically arranged within the same caste, often between individuals who have never met. In some southern Indian communities and among many Muslims, families aim to reinforce existing familial bonds by marrying cousins whenever feasible. For parents, the quest to find an ideal partner for their child can be daunting. Many rely on their social networks, and increasingly, matrimonial advertisements in newspapers. These ads typically detail the individual's religion, caste, educational background, physical attributes, and income potential, and may subtly reference the expected dowry amount, despite the fact that both giving and receiving dowries are illegal.

2.0 3.0 Caste and Class Varna, Caste, and Other Divisions

Social inequality is a global phenomenon, yet the Indian caste system exemplifies one of the most intricate forms of social stratification. While caste has been a longstanding institution, it has faced intense scrutiny in recent times and is experiencing considerable transformation. Caste consists of ranked, named, and endogamous groups, with membership determined by birth. India is home to thousands of castes and subcastes, encompassing hundreds of millions of individuals. These extensive kinship-based groups are essential to the social fabric of South Asia. Belonging to a caste offers individuals a sense of identity and a reliable support network in various circumstances. The term "caste" originates from the Portuguese word "casta," which translates to species, race, or kind. In the Indian context, terms such as *varna*, *jati*, *jat*, *biradri*, and *samaj* are often used interchangeably with caste. *Varna* refers to four broad categories that encompass numerous castes, while the other terms denote specific castes and their subdivisions, commonly referred to as subcastes. Many castes are linked to traditional professions, including those of priests, potters, barbers, carpenters, leatherworkers, butchers, and launderers. Generally, individuals from higher-ranking castes enjoy greater prosperity compared to those from lower-ranking castes, who frequently face poverty and social marginalization. Historically, the so-called "Untouchables" were assigned to tasks deemed polluting. Since 1935, this group has been recognized as "Scheduled Castes," and Mahatma Gandhi referred to them as *Harijans*, meaning "Children of God." Currently, the term *Dalit*, meaning "Oppressed," is the preferred designation for these individuals, who constitute approximately 16% of the population. Additionally, other groups, often labeled as tribes and referred to as "Scheduled Tribes," are also incorporated into the caste system to varying extents. In rural regions, numerous individuals from lower castes continue to face challenges such as landlessness, unemployment, and various forms of discrimination. Conversely, in expanding urban areas, caste identities are often not recognized by casual acquaintances, and the longstanding barriers to intercaste interactions are diminishing rapidly. In certain urban environments, intercaste marriages among individuals of similar social standing have gained acceptance. The link between caste and specific occupations is also decreasing significantly. Recent years have witnessed significant transformations in the observance of caste. It has become both legally and socially unacceptable to promote the superiority or inferiority of any caste openly, and lower caste communities are increasingly asserting their political influence. While traditional caste hierarchies are eroding, caste identities are being reinforced, particularly among marginalized groups that benefit from special educational opportunities and reserved quotas in electoral positions and government employment. In a response

to the rigid caste system of Hinduism, many Dalits have turned to Buddhism, inspired by the esteemed B.R. Ambedkar.

3.1 Classes: The majority of Indians live in rural areas, where the intersections of caste and class are prominent. Typically, large landowners belong to the upper caste, while small-scale farmers are associated with the middle caste, and landless laborers are often from the lowest castes. This dynamic creates a three-tiered class structure in rural regions, with individuals from these groups increasingly collaborating across caste lines to bolster their economic and political influence. For instance, since the late 1960s, certain middle-ranking cultivating castes in northern India have united politically in response to competition from higher-caste landowners, aiming to promote their shared economic goals. In urban settings, the relationship between class and caste is less straightforward, as various interests frequently transcend caste divisions. When considering India as a whole, categorizing classes proves challenging due to ambiguous criteria. Estimates suggest that the upper classes comprise about one percent of the population, roughly ten million individuals, including affluent property owners, industrialists, former royalty, senior executives, and successful entrepreneurs. Just below this tier lies a substantial upper middle class. Conversely, at the lower end of the spectrum, around half of India's population consists of low-wage workers and hundreds of millions living in extreme poverty, facing severe deficiencies in housing, education, and other economic necessities.

3.2 Village Structure and Cohesion: Approximately 75% of India's population resides in around 500,000 villages, where the foundation of the economy—agriculture—thrives. While most villages have populations under 1,000, some can accommodate up to 5,000 residents. Indian villages exhibit considerable complexity and are not socially or economically isolated. Each village typically encompasses a diverse array of economic, caste, kinship, occupational, and religious groups that are interconnected within the community. The residents include a variety of roles, from priests and farmers to merchants, artisans, and laborers. Additionally, vital horizontal connections link each village to numerous others and to urban centers, both nearby and distant. In everyday life and during vibrant festivals and rituals, individuals from different groups exchange essential goods and services. Historically, villages recognized a headman and a panchayat, a council made up of prominent local figures. Disputes were generally resolved within the village, with minimal involvement from police or judicial systems. In contemporary times, the government has established an elected panchayat and headman system, which differs from traditional practices and often requires the inclusion of women or individuals from marginalized castes. According to a rotating schedule, a certain percentage of village council heads must be women or Dalits. Increasingly, state and federal regulations are encroaching on village life, undermining traditional authority structures. Moreover, rising dissent and competition have emerged in various rural areas, driven by villagers' growing engagement with the broader world through travel, employment, education, and media, alongside heightened pressure on land and resources due to population growth.

3.3 Urban Life: The rapid pace of urbanization is significantly reshaping Indian society. Currently, just over 25% of the population resides in urban areas. Mumbai, with a population of 18 million, stands as the sixth largest urban center globally, while Kolkata follows as the fourteenth largest with 13 million residents. In recent years, the growth rate of India's major cities has outpaced that of smaller towns and rural areas, largely driven by migration from rural regions. These large cities are characterized by high population density, congestion, noise, and pollution, alongside a lack of access to clean water, reliable electricity, sanitation, and adequate housing. Slums are prevalent, often situated next to upscale apartment complexes, with streets crowded by pedestrians, livestock, waste, and vehicles emitting diesel exhaust. While traditional caste structures are less rigid in urban settings, caste affiliations still play a crucial role, as job opportunities are frequently secured through connections with caste members, family, and friends. The resilience and resourcefulness of low-income urban workers are evident as they navigate various roles as entrepreneurs, small traders, and laborers. The expanding middle class is becoming increasingly visible in urban areas, benefiting from enhanced educational and job prospects. For them, as well as for all city residents, community ties are strengthened through neighborhood connections, social organizations, and cultural celebrations. Cities serve as vital centers for commerce, education, science, politics, and governance, essential for the nation's overall functioning. India boasts the largest film industry in the world, primarily based in Mumbai and Chennai, with a growing number of popular television channels. These media outlets vividly portray urban life, influencing the aspirations of countless individuals in smaller towns and rural communities across the country.

4.0 Conclusion

India's population has surpassed one billion, increasing by over 18 million annually—equivalent to the population of Australia—over the last decade. In this period, Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state, has seen its population grow by more than 25 percent, reaching approximately 166 million, which is about 60 percent of the

total population of the United States. India now supports a population that is more than three and a half times larger than that of the U.S. within an area roughly one-third its size. Although family planning initiatives are becoming more popular, leading to a gradual decline in the growth rate, projections indicate that by 2050, India's population could reach around 1.5 billion, making it the most populous country in the world, surpassing China. In the context of India's vibrant democracy, various groups are increasingly advocating for their fair share of limited resources and benefits. While advancements in agricultural practices are enhancing productivity, there is a concerning decline in forests, rangelands, and water resources. As competition intensifies, issues related to politics, society, ecology, and the economy are fiercely debated. Achieving justice in terms of class, gender, and access to essential resources remains a challenging objective. India is not unique in grappling with these significant challenges and is part of a broader global effort to find solutions. Throughout its history, the people of India have demonstrated resilience in establishing order amidst complexity, uniting diverse groups in collaborative efforts aimed at benefiting society as a whole. They promote harmony among individuals with differing interests, fostering reliance among family and friends, delegating tasks based on individual skills, and striving to uphold moral values as defined by both divine and community standards. These enduring strengths will serve as a foundation for Indian society as it navigates future challenges.

5.0 References

- i. Adikant, P., Nag, S.K. & Patil, S.K. (2011). Traditional Fishing Techniques of Tribes in Bastar Region of Chhattisgarh. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, 10(2), 386-387. Retrieved September 21, 2019 from nopr.niscair.res.in
- ii. Almeida, P.R.D., & Charles, A. (2015). The Future of Urban Development & Services Urban Development Recommendations for the Government of India. World Economic Forum.
- iii. Bhoje, G. (2016). The Changing Trends in Family Structure. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 343-353.
- iv. Brahmanandam, T., & Babu, T.B. (2016). Educational Status among the Scheduled Tribes: Issues and Challenges. *The NEHU Journal*, 14(2), 69-85.
- v. Change and Development in Rural Society. (2015). Social Change and Development in India.
- vi. Moulton, J. (2001). Improving Education in Rural Areas: Guidance for Rural Development Specialists. Rural Education. Revi, A., Koduganti, J & Anand, S. (2014). Cities as Engines of Inclusive Development.
- viii. Webster, J.C.B. (2001). The Dalit Situation in India Today. *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 18(1), 1-3.
- ix. Wimalasena, N.A. (2016). An Analytical Study of Definitions of the Term "Marriage". *International of Humanities and Social Science*, 6(1), 166-174.