

Socio-Cultural Stratification of India

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Résumé

Stratifications sociales et culturelles en Inde

La plupart des recherches sur l'Inde la considèrent comme une unité culturelle. Elles sont fondées sur des observations simples et intuitives. Cette contribution propose une approche de l'Inde comme une société multiculturelle, multilingue et multiethnique. La notion de nation comme un substitut de la culture est fort appropriée pour les pays comme l'Inde avec des cultures hétérogènes. Dans cette recherche, une tentative est également faite pour comparer les valeurs culturelles entre les différentes régions de l'Inde.

Abstract

Most of the research on any aspect of Indian culture or society considers holistic India as a single cultural unit and is based on mere observations and intuitive assumption and not based on empirical investigation. This paper is an attempt to create an understanding that India is a multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic society and that the usage of nation as a surrogate for culture is in-appropriate for countries like India with heterogeneous cultures. In this research an attempt is also made to compare the cultural values within the various regions of India.

Culture has been increasingly viewed as influencing the daily life and behaviour of the individuals. It is man-made part of environment and it largely determines the course of our lives (Herskovits 1969 p.305). Winick (1958 p.144) elucidates that it is everything that is "non biological and socially transmitted in a society, including artistic, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behaviour, and the techniques of mastering the environment." The term 'culture' still remains elusive and fuzzy, which has been defined and interpreted in innumerable ways. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) have reviewed about one hundred and sixty four different definitions and the conceptions associated with culture (Henry 1976 p.122; Herskovits 1969 p.305; Usunier 2000 p.4). Groeschi and Doherty (2000 p.12) opine that the often quoted work of Kroeber and Kluckhohn in literature of identifying more than 164 definitions of culture suggests that culture defies a single all purpose definition and there are almost as many meanings of the culture as people using the term. Different definitions of "culture" reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. In general, the term culture denotes the whole product of an individual, group or society of living beings. It includes technology, art, science, moral systems and the characteristic behaviours and habits of the selected living entities.

In particular, it has specific more detailed meanings in different domains of human activities.

Culture operates at various levels of society: nation, industry, occupation, corporate and organization (Groeschl and Doherty 2000 p.15). Though there have been different frameworks proposed by different scholars for operationalization of culture but Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural values at the national level has been the most famous and widely used for calculating the cultural values of nations.

Although using nation as a cultural unit has led to wide contribution to understand the cultural differences and behaviours across various nations but it has failed to recognize the differences between the various subgroups within the nations (Ogden and Jensen 2004). Lenartowicz and Roth (1999) observe that most existing approaches to studying culture use nations that are convenient to define but usually represent broad unit of analysis. They suggest that culture-based research should identify and examine multiple subcultures within a single country. India is a country with economic, caste, ethnic, religion and linguistic diversities (Stern 2003). The recognition of India as a single culture unit could lead to wrong comprehension of the phenomenon and lead to erroneous decisions. Large countries like India "can be divided into regions differing along geographic, climatic, economic, linguistic and/or ethnic lines and generally assumed to differ culturally" (Hofstede et al. 2007). The regions within many countries differ from each other substantially with regards to income, mobility, media access, employment and socio-economic characteristics (Roth 1995 p.166). Chatterjee (1998) as quoted in Rajagopal (1999 p.131) suggests "that in a country like India, the importance of negotiating national and sub-national contradictions increases rather than diminishes with globalization. He argues that these contradictions centre on the resiliency of community as a locus of affiliation and action, as means of resistance to the homogenizing impetus of capital, as a site of historic memory, and as a resource for alternative futures." So it becomes imperative to understand the difference between the various cultural communities with in India. There is the possibility of making wrong conclusions about cultural effects if the subcultures are not taken into consideration (Lenartowicz and Roth 2001 p.321).

India is home to several thousand ethnic groups, tribes, castes, and religions. The castes and sub-castes in each region relate to each other through a permanent hierarchical structure, with each caste having its own name, traditional occupation, rank, and distinctive subculture. Tribes usually do not have a caste hierarchy but often have their own internal hierarchical organization. The Indian society is "regionally diverse (north/south/east/west), communally differentiated (Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian/ Buddhist, etc.), socially stratified (in terms of caste or class) and culturally discrete" (Uberoi 1993 p.45).

India is a multicultural country with multitudinous groups and subgroups. The total geographic area is 329 million acres (Datt and Sundharam 2003 p.92), which is roughly the size of Western Europe and is inhabited by one billion people (Rangarajan 2000 p.294). India is a vast country with diverse regional and sub regional variations (Kumar 2004). The country abounds with economic, caste, ethnic, religion and linguistic diversities (Stern 2003). The

size and heterogeneity makes it difficult to generalize its ecological record (Rangarajan 2000 p.294). This further makes it an arduous task to understand the consumption pattern and consumer behaviour in India.

The discussion of values of any society is a difficult task, and the difficulty increases manifold when it involves India, where values vary on the basis of religion, language, religion, sect, caste, class, and ethnicity (Srinivas 2003 p.172). The social structure, religion, family and kinship of the Indian society help in conceptualizing and comprehending its cultural profile to some extent.

The Indian social structure is marked by caste system and extended family system. The caste is "a purely social and possibly occupational association" (Weber 1974 p.28). Caste system is one of the most commented upon features of the Indian society (Chhokar 2007). It is an ancient historical legacy linked closely with Hinduism and still dominant (Raina 2004). The caste system is believed "to have been first enunciated by ancient law-giver Manu some time in Vedic period (1500-1000 B.C.)" (Chhokar 2007). This system consists of four *varnas* or social groups namely *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and the *Shudra*. The hierarchy was clearly established with Brahmin at the top and in the descending order with *shudra* at the lowest place in the social order (Rangarajan 1992 p.45). This was known as *varna* model of caste system, in which the first three groups were regarded as "twice-born" or *dwija* (Srinivas 2003 p.4). The structural distance between the various castes is defined in terms of pollution and purity as higher caste is regarded as "pure" compared to the lower caste (*ibid.*). The Brahmins constituted of the elite, learned and the landed, the *Kshatriyas* were the warriors, the *Vaishyas* were the traders and the *Shudras* included the menials and the lowest (Raina 2004). There are hundreds of *jatis* or endogamous groups, which can be grouped into these four *varnas* (Srinivas 2003 p.3).

Religion and culture are inextricably woven and religion has a potent influence on the peoples' lives across diverse cultures (Tarakeshwar, Stanton and Pargament 2003). Not only is the Indian society marked by castes and tribes, it is also abound with religious pluralism as the major religions have many subgroups (Deol 1995 p.25). Every major religion of the world except Confucianism is represented in India (Srinivas 2003). There are eight major religious groups within India: Hinduism is the main religion which is followed by 82.7 percent of the population, Muslims constitute 11.8 percent, Christians (2.6percent), Sikhs (2 percent), Buddhists (0.7 percent), Jains (0.4 percent), Zoroastrians (0.3 percent), and Jews constitute 0.1 percent of the Indian population (Bhatnagar 1995 p.39). Religion and spirituality have great effect on the Indian psyche (Das 2002). In earlier centuries religion was part of every aspect of lives of Indians (Mandelbaum 1996). Indian culture has strong religious roots and is a way of Indian life, which has evolved over many centuries (Venkatesh 1995). Every part of Indian culture has deep religious roots (Venkatesh 1995). Hinduism the main religion is difficult to define and is interpreted in number of ways (Chhokar 2007). It "represents a complex system of daily practices, rituals, beliefs, and symbolic patterns that overlap various aspects of social life" (*ibid.*). Some scholars have related caste system to Hindu religious beliefs and practices (Alley 2006 p.127) and have agreed that caste in the past was an integral part of Hinduism (Beteille 1993 p.445).

The other prominent religions groups are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. Mandelbaum (1996) observes that Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are the religions that have been introduced into India by the foreigners while Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism are indigenous religions, which "rose out of Hinduism, bearing a social message and "modified the Hinduism of time". The religions that rose against the caste system, sooner or later were reabsorbed into the caste system as these movements grow, develop through a cycle and then devolve back in to the system (Mandelbaum 1996 p.525). This is true for most of the religions as is evident in Sikhism, which is comparatively a modern religion but has failed to eschew the caste system.

Language is the vehicle of culture (Herskovits 1968). It is the most recognizable part of culture (Hofstede 2001 p.21). India has amazing linguistic heterogeneity as more than 200 languages are spoken by different groups (Hasnain 2003 p.155). In India there are 1,652 languages out of which 350 are recognized as 'major languages' and 18 are the official languages (Chaudhary 2004 p.8) A single ethnic area may have many languages, as in Nagaland which has 19 languages and dialects (Deol 1995 p.25). The first language of most people is scheduled language attributed to them but about 38 million people speak "mother-tongues" which that are not included in the Indian constitution's scheduled language groups (Stern 2003 p.20). This multilingualism "developed historically by means of a series of conquest and amalgamations of a wide variety of linguistic groups, topped by the British conquest, and the imposition of English for those who wished to fill the important military, educational, business, and governmental positions" (Ross 1965 p.214). Hindi is spoken by about 400 million people, English by only the elites and Sanskrit which has great cultural, religious and sentimental significance is hardly spoken by anyone (Stern 2003 p.19). The languages spoken by Indian population can be divided into four language families (Hasnain 2003 p.156) :

1. Austric family (*Nishad*)
2. Dravidian family (*Dravid*)
3. Sino-Tibetan family (*Kirat*)
4. Indo-European family (*Aryan*)

There is a great diversity in the languages included in these four language families. Around seventy three percent people speak Aryan languages, twenty percent speak Dravidian languages, 1.38 percent speaks Austric languages and 0.85 percent speaks Sino-Tibetan languages (*ibid.*). The Austric family mainly includes languages spoken by the central Indian tribal belt: Santhals, Munda, Ho, Koraku etc.

The Sino-Tibetan family languages are spoken mainly by the tribal belts of the North-East. The Dravidian family comprises of languages like Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gondi etc. which are spoken by the people in Southern India. The languages in the Indo-Aryan language family are spoken by the majority of the population. This language family includes languages like Marathi, Konkani, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marwari, Mewati, Hindi-Urdu, Chattisgarhi, Bengali, Maithili, Punjabi, Kumayuni and Garwahli etc (*ibid.*).

English language was introduced by the British in the country. It is spoken by minority of people who are elites and who lead India towards modernization (Stern 2003 p.19). The English language is "sine qua non for entrance into the elite bureaucratic services, the officers' mess, the executive suite, the upper reaches of the professions, the circles of artists and intellectuals who are invited to international conferences, editorial rooms of influential newspapers and journals, the professoriate of leading universities, the student bodies and old boys' associations of "great public schools" and fashionable colleges, the company of the distinguished, the beau mode of the best people, the celebrations of the rich, the right clubs and, now crucially for India, the world of the Internet and of India's burgeoning information technology industries" (ibid). Though there are diverse languages but the "basic thought, ideal and focus, has been the mythology of India, the ancient lore of India, the ancient songs of India and they extend from the banks of Brahmaputra to Cape Comorin" (Prasad 1965 p.358). The above thought elucidates the unity in diversity within India. Kumar (2000 p.12) feels that new information and communication technologies can be expected consolidate linguistic identities along with sub-regional identities.

Indian kinship systems are extremely heterogeneous and diverse. They are "regionally diverse (north/south/east/west), communally differentiated (Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian/Buddhist, etc.), socially stratified (in terms of caste or class) and culturally discrete (Uberoi 1993 p.45). Karve (1993) has divided the Indian kinship organizations on the basis of four geographical regions: Northern, Central, Southern and Eastern.

1) *Northern Zone* : This comprises of region between Himalayas in north and the Vindhya ranges in south. This region includes states like Sind (now part of Pakistan), Punjab (including western Punjab now in Pakistan), Kashmir, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, part of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Assam and the independent kingdom of Nepal. In this area the languages derived from Sanskrit are spoken by the majority of the population and the languages are Sindhi, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Hindi, Bihari, Bengali, Assami and Nepali.

"The present northern family is a continuation of the family of the ancient times with slight modifications. It is patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal. Marriage is generally outside of the kin-group and the local group. It is a joint family in which the brides are all brought from outside and the girls are all given away. The behaviour is strictly regulated according to generation, according to whether one is born in the family or married into the family and finally according to whether one is a man or a woman. Customs like levirate and sororate, by which a widow lives with the younger brother of her husband and a man marries the younger sister of his wife, show that marriage is very much a relationship between families rather than between individuals. The giving and receiving of gifts also reflects the familial aspect rather than the individual aspect of the transaction."

2) *Central Zone* : This zone comprises of regions between the northern and southern zones and includes states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Kathiawad, Maharashtra and Orissa. The main languages spoken here are Rajasthani, Hindi, Gujarati, Kathiawadi, Marathi and Uriya are spoken

which are of Sanskrit origin, so there is close affinity to northern zone. But within this region there are large segments of people who speak Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic languages. As this Zone lies between northern, southern and eastern zones it is influenced by all these regions though not uniformly. In Rajasthan, Kathiawad and Gujarat only Sanskritic languages are spoken and so the kinship pattern followed is predominately northern, though few customs are similar to southern zone. Some groups practice one type of cross-cousin marriage (marriage of man to his mother's brother's daughter) which is as a result of *mélange* of different ethnic elements. In Maharashtra majority of the people speak Sanskritic language, while many people in east speak Dravidian languages and Marathi includes many words of Dravidian origin. The majority of the people practice one type of cross-cousin marriage while other types of cross-cousin marriages are taboo but marriage to father's sister's daughter is followed in southern Maharashtra. In north junior levirate is allowed in many castes while in central and southern Maharashtra it is not allowed. The state is most affected by the southern practices as is evident in the kinship behaviour, kinship terms, folk-songs and literature. In Orissa more than one-fourth of the population is tribal and the languages spoken here belong to all three linguistic families in India. The region is not homogenous like Maharashtra but many agriculturists allow one type of cross-cousin marriage. This zone though diverse in its various areas but permits one type of cross-cousin marriage.

3) *Southern Zone* : This region encompasses those parts of southern and central India where the languages of Dravidian family are spoken and can be divided into five regions: Karnataka where the Kannada language is spoken; Andhra Pradesh or Telingana, where Telugu is spoken; Tamil Nadu where the language is Tamil; Kerala or Malabar where the Malayalam is spoken; region from north of Andhra Pradesh through Bastar and Western Orissa into Southern Bihar where a number of mixed languages are spoken. The Dravidian languages are related in both form and history (Trautmann 1993).

In this zone though patrilineal and patrilocal family is the dominant family type but there are some important sections which follow matrilineal and matrilocal and a substantial number whose systems possess features of both types of organizations. In marriages exchange of daughters is favourable and marriage among close kin is preferred. There are cross cousin and uncle-niece marriages but one cannot marry member of one's own clan. The girl can marry any of her older cross cousins or her mother's younger brother, so a boy can marry any of his younger female cross-cousins or daughter of any of his elder sisters. The children of brother and sister should marry while children of two brothers and two sisters must not marry (Trautmann 1993). In north there is clear distinction between the blood relations and in-law relations and one can't marry within a blood relation. But in south people can marry in blood relations and marriage strengthens the existing bonds of kinship. This brings in society that is totally different from north. The distinction between daughters and wives is not as sharp as in north and a wife enjoys greater freedom. Similarly the distinction there is minimal distinction between house of father and father-in-law and usually marriage takes place between

kins not living too far and there is much visiting between the two houses. The women in lower castes enjoy a comparatively higher position to the Brahmin women as divorce and widow remarriage is permitted, there is economic independence and gender equivalence within the lower castes (Gough 1993).

4) *Eastern Zone* : This zone comprises regions of regions in east and north- east where languages belonging to Austro-Asiatic family of languages are spoken. But there is not much known among the kinship patterns of these groups. The succession of property in Khasi community of Meghalaya devolves in the female line and sons have no right to it. It is a multilineal society but patrilineal principles are gradually introduced by modernization (Nongbri 1993).

The kinship systems and institutions of North India are different from Dravidian or the South Indian systems (Dumont 2000 p.111). While the family and kinship system in North-East India is totally different from the system and institutions prevalent in the other regions of India.

For most Indians, family ties are more important than others which closely bind an extended group which is more than a nuclear family and their parents (Stern 2003 p.37). In general the connectedness is more important in the Indian family and the family functions like a psychological unit. Chaudhary (2004 p.106) feels that people largely interact on "the principles of relationships linked with kinship, age and gender dynamics". She believes that there is an intense desire for social links as kinship terms are often invoked in conversations even though people are not linked to each other and the family functions like a psychological unit in the family. The young people strongly align with their parents and search for outside relationships only if there are problems within the family (ibid.).

North India is dominated by the Proto-Australoid racial elements (Hasnain 2003 p.153). The main languages spoken in this region belong to Indo-European or the Aryan language (ibid. p.156). The present northern family is a continuation of the family of the ancient times with slight modifications (Karve 1993). It is patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal. Marriage is generally outside of the kin- group and the local group. It is a joint family in which the brides are all brought from outside and the girls are all given away. The behavior is strictly regulated according to generation, according to whether one is born in the family or married into the family and finally according to whether one is a man or a woman (ibid.).

Punjab state in Northern India was the frontier region of the country which has faced hordes of invaders from Western and Central Asia who ultimately got absorbed in the main population and some of the surnames like hoon, sur, sobthi which are originally Central Asian are integrated in the ethnic mosaic of Punjab (Singh 2003b p.xiv). Punjabi identity is mainly defined by language. Most of the communities (86) live in plains, few in the hilly terrain and some in semi-arid regions (11) and there are no schedule tribes in Punjab (ibid.). The main diet of Punjabis consists of wheat, buttermilk, tea with plenty of milk, milk and meat. The consumption of rice is much more in south and East India as compared to other regions while North dominates in wheat consumption (Chatterjee, Rae and Ray 2007). Though traditionally fruit and

vegetables were not part of the traditional meal but there is general increase of the consumption of the vegetables and fruits. There is marked change from vegetarianism to non-vegetarianism and there is the largest incidence of drinking alcohol in Punjab as compared to the national average (Singh 2003b p.xiv). The majority of the communities profess Hinduism (71), followed by Sikhism (38) and Islam (13). The state is comparatively more egalitarian as there is less social differentiation (17.89 per cent against the national average of 48.39 percent). *Baisakhi*, the festival of harvesting is the most important festival (ibid.).

The South Indian region is dominated by the Negrito race (Hasnain 2003 p.153). This region encompasses those parts of southern and central India where the languages of Dravidian family are spoken and can be divided into five regions (Karve 1993): Karnataka where the Kannada language is spoken; Andhra Pradesh or Telingana, where Telugu is spoken; Tamil Nadu where the language is Tamil; Kerala or Malabar where the Malayalam is spoken; region from north of Andhra Pradesh through Bastar and Western Orissa into Southern Bihar where a number of mixed languages are spoken. The Dravidian languages are related in both form and history (Trautmann 1993).

In this region though patrilineal and patrilocal family is the dominant family type but there are some important sections which follow matrilineal and matrilineal and a substantial number whose systems possess features of both types of organizations. In marriages exchange of daughters is favorable and marriage among close kin is preferred. There are cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages (Karve 1993).

Tamil Nadu the southern state of India has 364 communities which is the second largest number of communities in India and the social divisions are widely reported in 276 communities. All the communities are divided into subgroups. The Brahmans are divided into two sects: Saivites and Vaishnavites. The most interesting feature of the communities of Tamil Nadu is their division into two caste groups: right-handed and left-handed. The Brahmans are regarded as neutral and free from this division (Singh 1997 p.xxix). Rice is one of the staple foods of the Tamils from time immemorial and millets along with honey are also eaten. The consumption of rice is much more in south and East India as compared to other regions (Chatterjee, Rae and Ray 2007). Eating stale food was also common earlier. Alcohol made from coconut and palm trees is consumed. Milk as such is not consumed though mainly through coffee or tea, and vegetable consumption is higher among the urbanites than the rural people (Singh 1997 p.xxix). Hinduism along with local tribal religion is the main religion followed by Christianity and Islam. *Pongal* is the main festival celebrated by Hindus in which sweet rice is prepared for the cattle. The practice of drawing of threshold designs as part of household routine by females is prevalent in whole of Tamil Nadu (Dohmen 2004). This practice is unique to the region not prevalent anywhere in India.

The Western region of India comprises of regions like Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. The main languages spoken here are Rajasthani, Hindi, Gujarati, and Marathi, which are of Sanskrit origin, so there is close affinity to northern zone. But within this region there are large segments of people who

speak Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic languages. As this region lies between northern and southern zones it is influenced by these regions though not uniformly. In Rajasthan and Gujarat only Sanskritic languages are spoken and so the kinship pattern followed is predominately northern (Karve 1993). Some groups practice one type of cross-cousin marriage (marriage of man to his mother's brother's daughter) which is as a result of *mélange* of different ethnic elements.

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Gujarat historically has strong links with Rajasthan and Sindh from where many communities came, and has a larger percentage of trading and business communities and has the largest proportion of communities identified as Kshatriyas (28.8 per cent) (Singh 2003b p. xxv). The Parsis arrived in Gujarat in the nineteenth century and emerged as landowners, moneylenders, traders and industrialists (*ibid.* p.xxiv). The staple food consists of wheat, bajra, maize, gram and urad. Though there is increasing instance of non-vegetarian food (17.1 per cent) but incidence of vegetarianism is very high. Alcohol is consumed by males in communal feasts and rituals (*ibid.* p.xxvii). The state is a meeting ground of the kinship systems of north and south and so marriage and customs of both north and south India exist here. Majority of the population follow Hinduism (89.53 per cent) followed by Muslims (8.53 per cent). Other religious groups include Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs (*ibid.* p. 17). Diwali is principal festival of the Hindus.

The Eastern region is dominated by the Mongoloid race (Hasnain 2003 p.153). The Sino-Tibetan family languages are spoken mainly by the tribal belts of the North-East but Bengali which belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family is predominately spoken in West Bengal (*ibid.* p.156). But there is not much known among the kinship patterns of these groups. The succession of property in Khasi community of Meghalaya devolves in the female line and sons have no right to it. It is a multilinear society but patrilineal principles are gradually introduced by modernization (Nongbri 1993).

The population of West Bengal consists mainly of Hindus, followed by Muslims and Christians. British imperialism in India did not only bring in political and economic change but also social and cultural changes (Bandyopadhyay 2003 p.1). In Bengal Durga Puja is the most popular religious festival of the Hindus and it has emerged from a household ritual to an elaborate festival with the coming in of the British (Ghosh 2000 p.289). The cultural practices have been institutionalized in modern Bengal and Durga puja has become secular entity with participation of different castes, classes and gender (*ibid.*). There is rise of street-food consumption in urban Bengal as there "is decline of the familial meal as a ritual activity and the rise of non-ritual eating (snacks) directed at sensual stimulation rather than

assuaging hunger-pangs" (Mukhopadhyaya 2004 p.39). People are fond of tea and usually have it in clay cups called 'bhar'. The males often consume alcohol and women were observed consuming 'bhang' during Holi by the researcher. Football which was introduced by the British in Bengal became a strong unifying force among the Bengalis in the late nineteenth century (Bandyopadhyay 2003 p.2). It is most popular sport in Bengal even today, which is not that popular in any other part of the country.

There is no single culture which can be called 'Indian culture' as "each regional, linguistic, religious and caste group has its own culture" (Kakar et al. 2002 p.241). The social and cultural patterns of India exhibits pluralism in terms of language, geography, ethnicity, religion and culture (Singh 2000 p.44).

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