
UNIT 3 PROFILE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

**A. Malathi*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The understanding of rural communities helps in designing interventions better. Studying this unit would enable you to

- consider rural society as a heterogeneous society;
- describe the characteristic features of rural communities;
- develop an understanding of the complexity of rural communities; and
- identify critical issues of rural communities

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Rural communities form the backbone of India- adhering to the adage that India lives in its villages. Village life is much talked about in terms of its serenity, idyllic surrounding, free from conflict and having a beautiful relationship with nature. But there is much more to understand about the rural communities in the vast terrain of India. The geographical and cultural variability brings with it social arrangements that are adaptive to the specific context- hence defy the notion of uniformity in village communities. Also the various villages are subject to a number of factors, be it in the ecological, cultural, geographical and political or economic spheres that provide a dynamism to the village community, its existence and their ways of living.

A rural society is better understood through certain key aspects like size, populations, physical structure and their social and economic way of life. Also one needs to look at the way the economic and political policies influence the life of the villagers for any meaningful social work intervention. Social work interventions pertaining to village community have as much to deal with their economic condition as with their political condition and access to power. As much as their variability is a factor, some common elements can be understood

to be the pervasive factors of rural living. These and the institutional presence and its access also make an important focus for social work interventions. Like in the case of urban communities we draw upon insights from sociology, economics, and public administration to develop our understanding of rural communities. Similarly with regard to interventions we draw upon insights derived from social work methods. One predominantly in use is the community organization method.

There is homogeneity across villages in terms of certain broad features of social and economic characteristics. The technological and organizational aspects are also simpler compared to the urban areas and also well laid out within the socialization processes. Within the village there are bounded societies that clearly demarcate between various social groups. This is seen in the restrictions and taboo on rituals and customs and interactions with others. There is village endogamy or caste endogamy. The relationships are informal and primacy is accorded to face-to-face interactions with personal and kinship intimacy being predominant.

3.2 MEANING OF RURAL COMMUNITY

Rural communities reside in rural areas. Rural areas as per census consider the village as the basic area of habitation. A village is usually considered as the smallest area of habitation. The village generally follows the limits of a revenue village that is recognized by the local administration. The revenue village need not necessarily be a single agglomeration of the habitations. It could comprise of a large village or a cluster of very small villages. It has a definite boundary and definite name. But the revenue village has a definite surveyed boundary and each village is a separate administrative unit with separate village accounts. It may have one or more hamlets. The entire revenue village is one unit. There may be unsurveyed villages within forests etc., where the locally recognized boundaries of each habitation area are followed within the larger unit of say the forest range officer's jurisdiction.

The other meaning relates to the nature of livelihoods. Rural thus refers to livelihoods that are based on agriculture and something to do with nature. It would also refer to the scale and nature of technology used in rural areas. Thus in rural areas the technology followed is simple with production levels meeting one's family's needs and some surplus that could be sold in the markets nearby.

Rural Urban Continuum

The rural urban dichotomy is experienced in some states but not in others. For example in some states like Kerala the distinction of a village and town is impossible to discern. Instead there is a continuum. The left end of the continuum consists of the rural whilst the right of the urban having a mix of characteristics. Those which are having mixed features are placed in the middle. Changes from rural to urban are called urbanization. There is nothing like the ideal model of rural or urban but an increasingly urban flavour to rural locales. The rapid process of urbanization through the establishment of industries, urban traits and facilities has decreased the differences between villages and cities.

There are some sociologists who treat rural-urban as dichotomous categories differentiating the two at various levels including occupational differences,

environmental differences, differences in the sizes of communities, differences in the density of population, differences in social mobility and direction of migration, differences in social stratification and in the systems of social interaction.

A third view regarding rural and urban communities, believes that both village and city are elements of the same civilization and hence neither rural urban dichotomy, nor continuum is meaningful.

Some sociologists have used the concept of rural-urban continuum to stress the idea that there are no sharp breaking points to be found in the degree or quantity of rural urban differences. M.S. Rao points out that both village and town formed part of the same civilization characterized by institution of kinship and caste system in pre-British India. But there were certain specific institutional forms and organizational ways distinguishing social and cultural life in towns from that in village. In this one can consider the degree of urbanization as a useful conceptual tool for understanding rural-urban relations. The factors distinguishing rural from urban communities include occupation, size and density of population as well as mobility, differentiation and stratification.

However there is no clear conceptual difference between rural and urban as every village possesses some elements of the city and every city carries some features of the village.

3.3 DIVERSITY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural society includes a number of communities that live in what are known as villages. Villages in India vary with respect to their natural resource base, population density, demographic features, amenities, connectivity, historicity, and diversity of lifestyles, languages, cultural features and their proximity to city centres. Some villages have very old population as the majority of younger generation migrates in search of jobs. Such villages are known as Gray villages. Some of the villages are also uninhabited. There are other villages which are known as fringe villages which are located in the outskirts of the towns that eventually become parts of the urban whole. Such examples abound in the metropolitan areas for example, Nayabans in Noida – Harola etc which have been surrounded by the planned city of Noida in the south eastern outskirts of Delhi.

A village can have varying composition of social and occupational groups such as agriculturalists, artisans, craftsmen and other occupational groups and all depend one way or the other upon agriculture. One major understanding was that communities, which are non-tribal as well as tribal, tend to live in rural areas. Persons belonging to the former are often known as peasant societies or communities in which there is a definite bonding with the nearby market towns. These communities are not isolated like the tribal communities. Their linkage with the nearby towns is also through some forms of shared governance that bind them within the region to other constituents. They have also well established market links with the nearby town's people for the sale of surplus agricultural produce and for the purchase of useful items for daily living manufactured in the urban areas.

Villages are primarily food producing units and they are agriculture based. They produce not only for their own subsistence but also for the urban societies,

which are non-producing. Land and the natural resources are the primary means /unit of production in rural societies. Ecological conditions influence the pattern of their stay, with hamlets that are strung together or individual houses surrounded by their fields.

Housing Patterns and Settlements in Rural Areas

- a) Different kinds of villages are found all over the country. In some, the fields of the village surround a tight cluster of houses. An outlying hamlet or several satellite hamlets are also found attached to some villages in this case.
- b) Linear settlements – e.g. in Kerala and Konkan and in the delta lands of Bengal. In such settlements houses are strung out each surrounded by its own compound. However there is little to physically demarcate where one village ends and another begins.
- c) Here there is scattering of homesteads or clusters of two or three houses. In this case also physical demarcation of villages is not clear. Such settlements are found in hill areas, in the Himalayan foothills, in the high lands of Gujarat and in the Satpura range of Maharashtra.

Usually a village is conceived as a physical entity having an aggregation of houses of mixed architecture (some of mud and thatch and some of cement) in the midst of surrounding agricultural fields. Of course there may be some exceptions to the general image of a village. Village can have more than ten thousand population as in the case of Kerala. Or the village may be a conglomeration of cement houses inhabited by people who may predominantly be in service or may be self-employed non-agriculturalists as in the case of a number of villages situated near towns and cities in Himachal Pradesh.

Size of the Villages

In 1981 census there were 5, 57, 137 inhabited villages in the country. By the year 1991 this number increased to 4689 towns and 5, 80,781 villages. According to 2001 census there are 5161 towns and 6,38,365 villages including uninhabited villages with 72% of the total population living in villages. Further rural life is characterized by direct relationship of people to nature i.e, land, animal and plant life. Agriculture is their main occupation. Agriculture provides livelihood to about 58% of the labour force.

3.4 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, eli caste, dholi 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 higher classes.

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.

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.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What are the main features of rural social structure in India?
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- 2) Discuss the linkages between caste and class in rural society.
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- 3) What are the main features of the Jajmani system? Find out its variations in your region.
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- 4) Discuss the changes taking place in the Jajmani system in your area.
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- 5) What is the nature of family found in rural India? How is it considered as the basic unit? Discuss distribution of power in rural India.
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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.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What are the basic features of power relations in rural areas?

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3.5 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.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What are the two major sectors comprising the rural economic structure?

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- 2) Discuss the potential of non-agriculture and allied activities increasing rural employment and raising incomes.

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3) What are the basic features of rural economy? Discuss with reference to your region.

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4) Discuss how agricultural strategy with a focus on Dry land agriculture could change the situation of rural masses.

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Rural Assets and Poverty

The picture of assets in rural areas is skewed. Over 78% of the cultivators belonging to the category of marginal and small operators cultivate less than one third of the land. In contrast less than two percent of the cultivators having holdings of more than 10 hectares each cultivate about 29% of the land.

The average size of holding is bigger in states such as Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat. On the other hand in eastern states like Bihar and West Bengal the operational size of these holdings is relatively small. It may be remembered that the regional differences in the structure of holdings are related to the pressure of population on the land, soil, agro climatic conditions and the extent of irrigation. It is also true that the economic value and productive potential of small holdings in irrigated areas might be higher than relatively large landholding in areas where agricultures is largely dependent on rains.

The incidence of poverty is closely linked to the employment, ecological setting and ethnic profile of the population. Even if employment is available the nature of such an employment determines whether such a person is poor or not. The incidence of poverty in rural areas is linked to such factors as landless or marginal farmers cultivating low value products, mostly for family subsistence; self-employed artisans/service rendering people catering to low income customers/markets; women headed households and groups with larger families but limited assets and earning opportunities; people with limited skills and education engaging in seasonal casual work; socially excluded, depressed groups (e.g lower castes), tribals, nomads etc; victims of the side effects of development of infrastructure and other changes which disintegrated their past sustenance strategies (e.g people affected by breakdown of traditional occupations because of macro economic changes, construction of big projects, decimation of forests etc).

Rural Credit Markets

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. The traditional institutions survive because of their timely, ready availability of credit and their informal linkages that could be caste or kinship or village based with the client groups. There has been an effort to meet credit needs from the formal institutions but there has been a low presence of these with addition to bureaucratic hurdles in the way.

The growth of formal banking institutions was high during 1970s and 1980s following nationalization of banks in 1969. However there has been a decline in the formal banking services in rural areas since 1990s. Flow of credit to rural areas also declined.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Discuss the linkages between rural poverty and rural credit.

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3.6 POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Policies and prescriptions related to institutional presence, and procedures which govern access or that control and constrain legitimacy related to citizen participation etc strongly influence rural communities.

Reform measures such as reduction in fiscal deficit, reduction of subsidies, devaluation of rupee, export orientation and reduction of agricultural credit adversely affect the rural poor especially in terms of food security, which relates to production, distribution and pricing of the food grains. The agricultural sector is worst affected by the fiscal contraction which invariably result in a disproportionate cut in capital expenditure. Agricultural sector is the mainstay of the rural Indian Economy which is closely related to the existing pattern of the social equity. The shrinkage of the flow of resources to the rural sector, a misconceived interest rate policy which discriminate against agriculture , a sickening rural delivery credit system, the emergence of a new banking culture nurtured by reforms which is far from friendly to agriculture and rural development all go against the interests of rural economy.

Reform and post reform period impact on agriculture are found to be deleterious to the rural poor and the rural landless. Reforms have increased the vulnerability of these masses and this forms one of the critical issues for rural community development.

There are many policies that the government makes with regard to the rural sector directly- such as policies related to agriculture, rural credit policy, policy on investments to be made in social sectors- policies related to the provision of infrastructure in rural areas such as in health, education, employment (NREGA)

road connectivity, housing and sanitation, drinking water supply etc. At the same time policies related to industry such as mining, availability of land for real estate for urban areas affects villages located in urban fringes. Similarly the fiscal policy, which promotes export promotion, favouring areas for tourism development such as in the coastal areas affects the rural people who are living in these areas. These play a role in affecting the livelihoods of these communities and make them vulnerable to the point of crisis in survival. Thus these become critical for social workers to working with rural communities. Thus any thing that affects the rural populace be it with governance issues such as service delivery or with lack of institutional presence, is of great concern for rural community work.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Discuss how rural communities are affected by government policies.

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

We have seen how rural communities are understood through certain key aspects of like size, populations, physical structure and their social and economic way of life. We have also seen that despite the diversity there are certain common features like the social system of caste and inter caste relations which are closely related to their economic activities. The lower social hierarchy also means low in assets and income. We have also seen the importance of strengthening the livelihood base of agriculture and allied activities especially in the dry land region for the development of communities at the margins. We have also understood that the living conditions of these communities are subject to change both from external and internal factors especially from the policy interventions by the government. These would be important for any meaningful social work intervention.

3.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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