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Lecture Summary.

Indian Village: System and Tradition in Space, Modernity & Change

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"The soul of India lives in its villages", thus spoke Mahatma Gandhi at the beginning of 20th century. According to the 2001 Indian census, 74% of Indians live in 638,365 different villages. The size of these villages varies considerably: 236,004 Indian villages have a population less than 500, while 3,976 villages have a population of 10,000+. Most villages have their own temple, mosque or church depending on the local religious following. The villagers are directly related to the land and functionally participate in primary production. However they preserve a harmonious relationship between nature and human being. With its own size, the concentration of people and the associated cultural milieu, an Indian village may be defined as a multifaceted unit of habitat and culture. The Indian village represents the enduring work of humanity passing through the corridors of time and testifies to the success of Indian civilisation in managing the problems of survival.

India has been from the very beginning a land of villages and its socio-organizational set up has been essentially rural in character. In fact, though India claims to have evolved some of the earliest cities and towns as to be evidenced from the Mohan Jo Daro and Harappa cultures (before 3000 B.C.E.), and the city always remained a kind of important settlement abs socio-political unit in the country; the village has been the *raison d'etre* of Indian economy, thought, culture, political organisation and settlement. Even today the vast majority (3/4) of the Indian population is rural.

The impact of Indian culture explaining life in rural India contributes to the experiences and understanding of the deep interrelationship between human beings and the divine earth, the mother of resources. This sense of rootedness refers to the Hindu sense of unity and integration of life system. With this notion it may be stated that the Indian village is more system-oriented, and a dynamic expression of the society over time. This forms an emotional bond of belongingness and mental set setup within its ecological setting, pattern of resource utilisation, and socio-political background. Caste and land are the two fundamental components of influence in the village. Each caste is a social unit in itself, securing a distinguished position in the caste hierarchy which is controlled by different power, strength and forces in the framework of religio-ritual components. On the other hand those who control the land, dominate in the society. The higher castes own most of the land, which is the main source of wealth and also main need for a *Jati* (caste) to rise.

The Indian village society is still dominated by the system of caste hierarchy together with purity-pollution. The traditional system of four-tier hierarchy of society (*varna*) has also been associated with the purity-pollution. The four groups are the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriya (landlords), the Vaishya (merchants), and the Shudras (servants). It means that those belong to the high caste are more *pure*, and those to the lower castes are *polluted*. This resulted in calling the lowest castes untouchables (*achuta*), which later was given a different title of honour as *Harijan* (children of god) by Gandhi. In spite of all the changes, such traditions still prevail in village society. Politicians and social activists are now using the term *dalit* to identify such poor people of low castes. In the Census records and economic surveys they are put under the legal name 'scheduled caste'. The classification of the social groups in four main caste-groups (*varna*) was also associated with the functions which later turned into a strict rule. Those belonging to lower category of servant class had never been given the chance to have land rights. This mass of people, after the passage of time became downtrodden (*dalits*) who constitute a little over one-forth of India's population. A little more than one-thirds of India's rural population is defined as poor (i.e. 335 million).

The physical site pattern of Indian villages as far as housing ownership by different *castes* (societal group identified since birth) is generally of two broad types. One is *compact* where the limitation of physical space compels the various societal groups to live closely but loosely separated by streets. The other is *hamleted* where different castes form different groups living more

independently and separated by open fields but joined together functionally through the more secular paths. Between these two polarities several intermediate structures may also be seen. The *succession system* (say behavioural and economic system) of the culture and economy in Indian villages is basically the result of two norms (models): ***Religio-ritual***, and the ***Eco-secular***, which together form an articulating equilibrium (cf. Fig.): Religio-ritual model of the distance maximisation, and Eco-secular model of the distance minimisation. The above two models are closely related to each other and functionally work in a reciprocal way. It means that the settlement patterning within an individual village or the social distances among the castes are struck at the equilibrium of the religio-ritual norm on the one side and the eco-secular norm at the other.

The relationship between social activities and religious rituals (conceiving Indian Village as "Place Ballet") forms at least five geometrical model patterns of time-space routines of organisation: 1 *Ascending triangle*, 2 *Descending triangle*, 3 *Pyramid*, 4 *Side-by-Side worship*, and 5 *Concentric rings*. In each case, the symbolic significance of rituals organised in these patterns is paralleled by the numbers, ritual purity or other dimensions of status of worshippers and their gods. What does characterise the contexts in which the ascending triangle is found is that (1) ascent may take place over a long period extending over many days or even months, and (2) descent from the highest point reached in sacred time occurs rapidly with few or no rituals to assist the worshippers in their return to the secular plane. The pyramid (3) is commonly used for important celebrations calling for two or more adjacent days of concentrated ritual activities culminating in the attainment of the greatest heights in sacred time reached by participants in a calendar year or, in other contexts, their lifetimes, The side-by-side model (4) describes activity among different individuals or groups who come together at a common point in time and usually but not always at a common point in space to perform more-or-less the same rituals but as separate groups. It is not uncommon in this pattern for the different groups of worshippers to ignore the other groups present. The concentric rings (5) refer what Hindu rituals are often arranged in sequence in which participants first identify with their nuclear family or other small group before merging in ritual activities with other such groups to identify with that larger kin or territorial unit of society.

Impacts of modern changes, individualism and more materialistic pleasure have drastically replaced the "joint" family system into "nuclear family". Most of the traditional villages in the region are facing the problems related to low productive agriculture, informal and basic education, health and hygiene, unemployment, poor housing condition, and above all loss of the old ethics and cultural values. These issues need to be taken care of in a frame of sustainable environmental development taking eco-friendly base through the indigenous methods, mass awareness, active cooperation and serious public participation, strong willingness of social harmony and unity, and above all not to encourage at any cost social and economic fraction, and also not to allow the corrupt politicians to disturb the village harmony for their vested interest and electoral strategy. There are enough resources for proper upliftment if the unity among all the fronts, sections and sectors can be promoted. The villagers should promote a strong ethical sense to remove the obstacles in the real development.

Change is obvious, acceptance and challenges too. Life in Indian villages is in a phase of transition, i.e. continuing the age-old traditions, and adopting the changing socio-economic system and values associated with them. The cry of the poor masses, distrust in the government system and the ideology to have charismatic gain without work are the common exposure. The ideology and allocation of funds for development are looking lucrative, but the practice of conservative thought and lack of work ethics result to the crisis. The present pattern of life in these two villages and philosophies by which the villagers life are the products of traditionalism together with recently adopted individualism and consumerism.

Basic Sources:
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