Socio-Cultural Issues in Contemporary India

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In the previous lesson, you have learnt about the social structure in India. You read about tribal, rural and urban societies, about stratification in terms of caste and class, about family, marriage, and the position of women in Indian society. The Indian society has evolved through the ages and advancements have taken place in diverse fields. You have also read in earlier lessons about social reforms in the Indian society. However, in every society there are socio-cultural issues that need to be addressed and tackled. Security of people, particularly of the vulnerable sections, such as women, children and the elderly people is a major concern in the contemporary Indian society. In this lesson, we will read about the major socio-cultural issues that need our immediate attention, if we have to preserve our social and cultural values. Some of the important socio-cultural issues that need to be addressed today are casteism, dowry, communalism, drinking, drug addiction, etc. The issues discussed here are not comprehensive. There are many other issues faced by the nation in general and regions and communities in particular, that all of us should think about. Can you make a list of other such issues?

Objectives

After reading, this lesson you will be able to

- *list some major issues and problems of contemporary Indian society;*

- *discuss issues like caste system, dowry, substance abuse etc.;*

- *examine the issues related with vulnerable groups like the children, women and the elderly people; and*

- *discuss economic issues like poverty and unemployment*

The caste system in India has its roots in ancient India. Just as the ashrama dharma laid down rules and duties with reference to the individual's life in the world, Varna or caste system prescribed duties with reference to the particular caste to which an individual belonged. Earlier they were all regarded equal in social status and could take up any profession they liked. There was no restriction in the matter of eating food or marriage with members of other profession. However, with the beginning of specializing in hereditary professions and coming in contact with the indigenous people situations changed and the birth of the person decided their caste. Hence, the Varna system that developed during that time was the outcome of the social and economic development. However, as time passed, it led to the division of society into high-caste and low-caste people who could not mix with each other. Inter-caste dining or marriage was forbidden. People belonging to the so called lower castes were exploited and slowly down the ages, their condition became miserable. They were poor and did not enjoy equality in society. They were not even allowed to draw water from the common wells of the villages, or even could go to the temples or to come close to the people of the so-called higher castes.

Thus, caste system hampered the healthy growth of different professions as entry into a particular profession was based on birth and not on ability.

Caste-based discrimination has at times even led to violence. The caste-system also makes the working of democracy in our country difficult. Society is divided into artificial groups that tend to support the candidate who belongs to their caste. They do not pay much attention to the fact whether he/she is a deserving candidate or not. This is not good for the health of democracy in India. Our country cannot make real progress unless this system is uprooted completely.

During the post-independence period, i.e. after 1947, the Government has taken cognizance of these issues and tried to tackle them through legislation (enacting laws to counter these issues) as well as by social action (by involving the civil society, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and social groups. These steps have helped in improving the situation but still a lot more needs to be done. Visit the house of a person who belongs to a community other than yours. Do you find any difference in their way of living and eating habits? Write a short essay bringing out the differences as well as similarities.

Issues Related to Women

Our Constitution gives equal rights to both men and women in every field. Today, women enjoy voting rights, right to inheritance and property. In fact, the Constitution lay down that the government should promote with special care the interests of the weaker sections of the people. Several laws have been passed since independence to promote the interests of women. These laws relate to marriage, inheritance of property, divorce, dowry, etc. In1976, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed to provide for equal remuneration to men and women for similar work.

Recently, the government has started a scheme for the protection of girl child. The scheme is called *'Ladli',* in which an amount is set aside at the time of the birth of a girl child, which she gets when she completes eighteen years of age. This amount is then used for the education or the marriage of the child. Similarly, there is another scheme called 'Jaccha Baccha scheme'. Under this scheme, the state governments take care of the birth of the child and all expenditure related to medical assistance for the upbringing of the child. However, in spite of these provisions, we find a lot of discrimination against women.

Gender Discrimination

In India, females are discriminated in various fields like health, education and jobs. The girls carry the liability of dowry on their head, and they have to leave their parents home after marriage. Besides, in order to safeguard their old age parents prefer to have male offspring. Many female babies are aborted, abandoned, deliberately neglected and underfed simply as they are girls. This is worst in the state of Rajasthan. Now there is a great change in this direction. In some states like Haryana where girl child ratio is very low, the government has taken out many schemes to promote education of girls. Reservation of jobs for women and even six months maternity leave is provided to them besides many others.

The World Bank Document, "A New Agenda for Women's Health and Nutrition" (Washington 1995) estimates that in developing countries, 450 million adult women have their development problems due to lack of protein input during their childhood. In many communities, women and girls get less food or poor quality food compared to men and boys. When they are ill, they get less attention or receive some attention only when the disease becomes extremely serious. There is ample evidence at the global level of disparity in health status between men and women and their access to medical services.

In a majority of the countries, literacy rate for women is significantly lower than that for men. In 66 countries, the gap between the male and female literacy

rates is estimated to be larger than 10 percentage points and in 40 countries, it is larger than 20 percentage points in the age group of 6-11, which corresponds to primary level education. According to 2011 census, there is a gap of 16.7 percent between the literacy rate of men and women i.e. men's literacy rate is 82.14 percent compared to women's literacy rate that stands at 65.46 percent. About 24.5 percent (85 million) of the girls in the world are estimated to be out of school compared to 16.4 percent (60 million) boys.

In most Indian families, a girl child is least welcome although in India women were respected from the early ages. Even though there are growing instances of girls excelling in education, tradition, custom, and social practices place greater value on sons than on daughters, who are often viewed as an economic burden. This attitude of the society also stands in the way of the girl child being able to achieve her full potential. A recent report on the girl child makes the following observations: ***"Girls are the world's most squandered gift. They are precious human beings with enormous potential, but across the world, they are generally the last to have their basic needs met and first to have their basic rights denied."***

The need of girls for food clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, nurture, and time to play often goes unmet. Their rights to safety, freedom from harassment and exploitation, as also their rights to grow, develop and blossom, are denied. Prejudice against the girl child becomes clearer and sharper from the data in sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years. In the Census, 2011 this ratio has been recorded as 914, down from 927 in the Census, 2001. The child sex ratio has steadily declined from 976 in 1961to 914 in 2011.

Dowry System

The practice of dowry is one of the worst social practices that has affected our culture. In independent India, one of the landmark legislations is the passing of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 by the Government of India. Despite the fact that the practice of both giving as well as accepting dowry is banned by law and such acts are punishable offences, the system is so thoroughly imbedded in our culture that it continues unabated. Whether it is rural or urban India, the blatant violation of this law is rampant. Not only dowry deaths, even most of the acts of domestic violence against women including psychological as well as physical torture are related to matters of dowry. Some of the very basic human rights of women are violated almost every day. Sometimes it is heartening to see some girls stand firm to assert their rights against dowry. But there is an urgent need to strengthen such hands by taking some concrete as well as comprehensive social, economic, political and administrative measures in order to free Indian society of this disease.

Find out a girl child who is not going to school. Tell her parents that the government has started a scheme called ***Ladli*** for the development of the girl child and that she will no longer remain a burden to them; rather she will become an asset. Therefore, they should send her to school.

Substance Abuse/Addiction

The habitual use of or dependence on harmful substances like liquor/alcoholic drinks, tobacco, bidis /cigarettes, drugs (for other than prescribed medical treatment) called substance abuse or addiction. As the range of addictive substances continues to expand, more and more persons particularly, in the younger age groups get addicted.

There are many factors that are responsible for pushing the young as well as adults into the trap of substance abuse. These factors include peer-pressure, non-conducive family environment and stress.

Substance abuse is a condition, which needs medical and psychological help. The parents have to be considerate to children, particularly during their transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, when many changes occur in their physique. Adolescents are naturally curious, they are exploring new worlds, ideas, behaviors and relationships. In the process, some are exposed to drugs. Unless their environment, families, schools and friends educate them about the ill effects of using drugs, they are likely to be trapped. Drinking and smoking are the most common as well as harmful addictive actions.

Drinking or intake of liquor /alcohol is a very serious problem of the society. The easiest pastime is to drink and forget worries, frustrations, even though temporarily. Its addiction creates serious consequences. Even with meagre earnings, drunkards buy liquor keeping the family needs at stake. If they cannot afford the standard variety, which is expensive, they go for the cheap variety. At times, they drink even the poisonous things. After drinking, they lose their senses. Sometimes it results in death or permanent disability. Most of the time, they ill-treat their wives and children after drinking. Smoking is a habit, which is very harmful to health, even more than drinking. Not only does it harm the smokers themselves, but also the people around them who are affected by the smoke in the atmosphere. If we respect the rights of others, then we should not smoke in public places like buses, trains, markets, offices etc. Smoking is a major cause of pollution and develops deadly diseases like cancer, heart diseases, breathing problems etc. According to World Health Organization, tobacco use, particularly smoking, is number one killer all over the world. The Union cabinet has banned smoking in public places. It has banned the sale of tobacco products near schools and colleges. It is mandatory for manufacturers of these products to issue a warning to the consumers of its ill effects with a caption on the product itself.

Communalism

India is a country of different religious faiths. Persons belonging to different communities such as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, etc. live in India. The aggressive attitude of one community towards the other creates tension and clashes between two religious communities. Hundreds of people die in communal riots. It breeds hatred and mutual suspicion. Communalism is an issue that needs to be tackled and eradicated. It poses a great challenge to democracy and unity of our country. It is therefore, a major obstacle in the path of our progress. Education is one very important means through which we can hope to bring peace and harmony in society. We must remember that we are all human beings first, before we belong to a religious community. We must respect all religions.

Our country is secular, which means that all religions are treated equally and everyone is free to follow their own religion.

Try to meet any person who is addicted to smoking, drugs, drinking or gambling. Tell him the ill effects of these things and suggest some ways to overcome this habit.

Issues Related to the Elderly

The world population is ageing. Globally, the aged were 8% in 1950, 10% in 2000 and estimated to increase to 21% in 2050. In India, the number of elder persons was 5.8% (25.5 million) in 1961.

In 1991, this figure increased to 6.7% (56.6 million). In 2011, it is estimated to increase to 8.1% (96 million) that is expected to grow to 137 million in 2021. The size of the Indian elderly (60 years and above) is expected to triple in the next few

decades. Providing social, economic, and psychological support to the aged is emerging as a fundamental concern of social development.

With the joint family breaking down, especially in the urban areas, where nuclear families are the trend, the aged are increasingly becoming unwelcome members in their own families. Community support base to the aged is assuming greater importance. Our culture to respect elders should be again imbibed in young generation so that the aged can maintain their self-respect. Remember, the elderly people should be respected. They have looked after you when they were younger and now it is your turn to pay back. You must look after and serve your old grandparents. Visit an old home and talk to the elderly people living there. Think how you can help them in living a better and happy life.

Issues of Poverty and Unemployment

India is a large country in area. It is roughly 2.4 percent of the total area of the world. However, do you know what percentage of the world's population it has? Well, it is about 16.7%. As per Census 2011, India's population is 1210 million. With such a huge population, some economic problems have developed. These are the problems of unemployment, inflation, poverty and price rise. A large section of our population lives under the poverty line. There is a huge unemployment. Inflation and price rise has added to the problem. With a significant number of people living below the poverty line, its impact on socio-economically marginal families in the form of poor quality of life, disease, low literacy, malnutrition, and child labour becomes a serious concern. Nearly a quarter of the population that belongs to the scheduled category is almost entirely below poverty line. Poverty is a fundamental problem, hindering development objectives. Unemployment is a situation where an able-bodied person, willing to work fails to find a job to earn a living. Chronic unemployment and the consequent poverty are responsible for the erosion of human values. Under the compulsion of poverty, parents do not hesitate even to send their children to the labour market. Millions of children miss their childhood because of this phenomenon. They remain uneducated, and ignorant – which results in their unemployment or under-employment and consequent poverty.

Beggary

It is a painful experience to come across beggars wherever we go. At the market place, railway station, hospital, temple, even at road crossings, you will notice some people approaching you with open palms. They ask for money or food. We also see many children begging in the streets. Beggary is a major social problem in India. The major causes of beggary in our country are poverty and unemployment. These days many gangs are operating in our society as well, that thrives on begging in an organized manner. However, beggary is a social curse, which must be eradicated. If you see beggars on the road or elsewhere, tell them that begging is an offence punishable by law both for the one who is begging and the one who gives alms.

Problems of Children

No country can progress unless it pays adequate attention to the development of children. A child is the future citizen of the country. Only those children who grow in a healthy atmosphere can contribute to the development and strength of their country. Our country has a large population of children.

It is our duty to make sure that they are provided with the opportunities for good health and education. A large number of children, because of poverty, do not go to school or are withdrawn from schools before they complete their elementary

education and are forced to start working at a young and tender age in factories, brick-klins, restaurants, hotels, shops etc. This hampers their growth physically, mentally, and emotionally. They grow with hatred and agony and fail to become worthy citizens of the nation.

A child in the age group of 6-14 years is supposed to be in the school. But unfortunately, of the 200 million Indian children in this age group, about 11.3 million are labourers. The estimate by NGOs puts it at 60 million, of which 2,00,000 work as domestic help and almost an equal number as bonded labourers. These children become vulnerable to physical and mental exploitation, they are starved, beaten and even sexually exploited. This is a serious problem and is generally known as 'child abuse'. Right to Education Act, 2009 provides for education of all children between the age of 6-14 years of age. Once this cherished goal of education for all is achieved, the state of our children will be much better.

- The evils such as dowry, child labour, child abuse, drug abuse and drinking have assumed alarming proportions in recent times.
- Gender discrimination against women and girls and the related difficulties they face in

Indian society is so rampant that it prevents them from realizing their full potential.

- Break down of the joint family system and the emergence of the nuclear family has increased the problems faced by elderly persons.
- Poverty and unemployment have detrimental effects upon the quality of life in society.

Findings and Suggestions

1. How do castes become a hindrance in selecting a profession of choice by an individual?

2. "Dowry is a social problem." Elaborate.

3. How is the development of female persons beneficial to a nation?

4. A Child is an asset of our country. Do you agree with this statement?

5. Do you think that Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 is effective for curbing dowry problem?

Give a reasoned answer.

6. "Girls are the world's most squandered gift." Discuss.

7. Poverty and unemployment are the root cause of many social problems. Discuss.

1. Society is divided into artificial groups that tend to support the candidate who belongs to their caste. They do not pay much attention to the fact whether he/she is a deserving candidate or not.

2. A scheme for the protection of girl child, in which an amount is set aside at the time of the birth of a girl child, which she gets when she completes eighteen years of age. This amount is used for the education or the marriage of the child.

3. The Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961

1. The habitual use of or dependence on harmful substances like liquor/alcoholic drinks, tobacco, bidis/cigarettes, drugs (for other than prescribed medical treatment) called substance abuse or addiction.

2. Tobacco

3. 137 million

4. With the joint family breaking down, especially in the urban areas, where nuclear families are the trend, the aged are increasingly becoming unwelcome members in their own families.

1. 1210 million

2. Poverty and unemployment

3. Begging is an offence punishable by law both for the one who is begging and the one who gives alms.

4. A child in the age group of 6-14 years is supposed to be in the school. But unfortunately, of the 200 million Indian children in this age group, about 11.3 million are labourers. The estimate by NGOs puts it at 60 million, of which 2,00,000 work as domestic help and almost an equal number as bonded labourers. These children become vulnerable to physical and mental exploitation, they are starved, beaten and even sexually exploited. This is a serious problem and is generally known as 'child abuse'.

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Social Problems in Rural and Urban India Rural and Urban Problems in India

Many scholars have referred to characteristic differences between the rural and urban areas and social problems are often identified by these differences. ***Characteristics of Rural Problems*** The significant characteristics of the rural areas in India which are associated with certain social problems are:

(a) People are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture and a large number of landowners have small and medium-sized landholdings.

(b) The upper caste people still hold large lands while people of the lower castes own either marginal land or work as landless labourers.

(c) Rural people are scattered in comparison to the urban people.

(d) Not only the norms and values but the practices of the rural people too continue to be traditional.

(e) The price the farmers get for their produces is less in relation to the work they put in.

Though the rural economic distress does not affect all farmers equally but the lower and middle-class farmers who are in a majority are forced to send their siblings to the urban areas to find new sources of livelihood. In cities, they are forced to remain in slums and work as daily wage earners due to the lack of education and proper training. The political economy of the State and the correlation of class forces are primarily responsible for their plight. The standard of living of the rural farmers is very low and their exploitation by big landlords, intermediaries and moneylenders is far greater. The other rural problems are due to the fact that since the rural people do not live in concentrated masses, the availability of specialised services to them is minimal. This is true for medical, market, banking, transport, communication, education, recreation and many other necessary services for modern living. Thus, in a general way, people in the rural areas are at a great disadvantage and have to suffer many social problems.

Characteristics of Urban Problems Just as many of the rural problems are the result of isolation and scattered living, many urban problems spring from concentration of population. Again, the political economy of the State and the correlation of class forces are primarily responsible for the plight of not only the rural poor but also the urban poor. Slums, unemployment, crimes, delinquencies, begging, corruption, drug abuse, environmental degradation, etc. are all urban problems, which are generally the result of intolerable living conditions in town and cities. In city life, anonymity increases cases of riots, communal conflicts and agitations.

Social Problems and Social Change in India Societies often face problems because of the imbalance in the forces of caste, race, gender, class, and so on. Social change is change in the patterned roles, or a change in the network of social relations, or in the structures and organisation of a society. Social change is never complete or total; it is always partial. It can be minor or fundamental. Further, the change can be spontaneous or planned. Planned change is to achieve some set of collective ideals. For example, after Independence, India also had set some collective goals to achieve. Some of the important changes that we find in our society since Independence are:

(a) Change from tradition to modernity in certain values and institutions

(b) Change from ascribed status to achieved status

(c) Change from predominance of primary groups to predominance of secondary groups

(d) Change from non-formal means of control to formal means of control

(e) Change from collectively to individualism

(f) Change from non- and anti-scientific methods of investigation to scientific methods of investigation

(g) Change from folkloric knowledge to rationalist knowledge

(h) Change from homogeneity to heterogeneity

(i) Change in the increasing awareness of rights among various sections of society due to the spread of education, weakening of the caste system and religious fundamentalism (needs critical debating), weakening of traditional sources of security, occupational mobility, enactment of several social laws, and so on.

Though we have achieved many of the set collective goals, many contradictions have also set into our system. For example, accessibility to the legal system has become a problem for the common masses of our country. At times, the forces of fundamentalism and parochialism destroy the ethos of nationalism by practising casteism, regionalism, communalism, linguism, extremism, terrorism, and so on. Many laws have been enacted but either these laws are full of loopholes or they are not properly implemented. Egalitarianism is enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India but the State enforces discrimination in many ways. The State preaches cultural pluralism but falls prey to the fundamentalism of all hues. All these contradictions have increased discontent and pessimism among people, which in turn have resulted in many social problems.

Discussion What have we discussed in the first module?

1. General theory of social problems: functionalist, conflict and symbolic interactions

2. History of social problems theory: the medical model, absolutist approach to conditions in society, modern studies of deviance and the subjective nature of social problems

3. Cultural deprivation, recidivism and social Darwinism

4. Objective reality to social problems: subjectivity and bias (all social research is political; the study of social problems – value-free or not)

5. Characteristics, types, causes of, and reactions to social problems

6. The sociological imagination

7. Social structure as the basic unit of analysis: the person-blame approach and the system-blame approach

8. Methods to study social problems

9. Rural and urban problems in India

10. Social problems and social change in India

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