

Social Hierarchies, Economic Inequalities and Interpersonal Relationships: An Overview from India

Sony Pellissery¹

Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), India

Abstract

Abject mass poverty is of the key feature of Indian subcontinent. The relationship question, in this paper, is viewed through the lenses of poverty. Thus, the spatial, political, societal and economic questions come to picture when relationships are examined through the eyes of the poor people. Face-to-face interaction, primarily, based on strong social group collective identity is the key hallmark of relationships in India. The social group identity brings hierarchy into the interaction patterns. Thus, even market relations are not merely based on the questions of economic incentives. Social identity deeply penetrates to the huge informal economy that permeates in India. Thus, caught in the web of relationships even at market sphere, the poor people come together to fight, protest and to collaborate for their own well-being.

Key words: Economic inequalities, Social hierarchies, Relationship.

Introduction

India is home to largest number of poor people in the world. Of 1.13 billion people, 27.8 per cent live below poverty line (below the accepted income levels of consumption requirements as per the conservative standards of Indian government). The face of this deep and persistent poverty is observable in poor spending on health, undignified ageing, poor educational standards, malnourished bodies, inferior housing, poor infrastructure resulting in deterioration in the quality of life, child labour, poor service delivery, less importance attached with safety measures etc. All of them have severe implications for inter-personal relationships within the household, village, work place, and in the larger community. At the same time, in recent times, wealth accumulation

¹ Associate professor, Institute for Rural Management (IRMA), Post Box No: 60, Anand, Gujarat, India – 388001. *Email:* sony.pellissery@stx.oxon.org. Sony Pellissery's research interests are around how personal relationships and micro politics in the communities shape public policies at the implementation stage. He teaches the courses of Development Theories, Collective Action and Social Entrepreneurship at IRMA

through businesses in India is reported, indicating increasing economic inequality. On the other hand, India is also marked by another interesting dynamics. It is the origin home for largest number of religions. Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Sikhism all were born here. It is also important to note the peculiar institution of caste, i.e., dividing human beings into social hierarchies according to their occupation, is peculiar to Indian culture. Thus, while the economic view of India may be depicting a weak face of the interpersonal relations, institutions of religion and society present a view of strong bonding. Interestingly, in many measures of happiness, south Asian countries have performed much better than the Western countries. Therefore, is not relationship and bonding factors in the society a more important factor to be considered? This paper aims to untangle the ambiguity around economic inequalities and hierarchical relations, and their impact on human relations in India.

Geographical and social settlements

The proximity defines relationship to great extent, and therefore the way human settlements are laid out is important significance for the way relationships are fostered in the human communities. India has some of the highest dense cities in the world, such as New Delhi, and Mumbai.¹ However, majority of the Indian population lives in rural areas. Currently, 28.3 per cent of Indian population live in urban areas (World Bank, 2000). Moving to urban areas and settling there is seen as a part of livelihood - getting educated and gaining jobs. The facilities and structure of interaction are substantially different in both urban and rural areas. The rural areas are marked with face-to-face interaction, while urban areas are, generally, thought to have secluded living with one's own family in a room in a building. However, this is not wholly correct in the Indian context. About 50% of urban population lives in slums or shanties, with minimal facilities. Most of the facilities (e.g. toilet, water taps) for the people in the slums are to be shared as common facilities. Such a housing situation forces people to come in regular touch with other persons in the settlement. Thus, it could be safely concluded that only about 10-15% of

Indians lead a life in which primary interaction is restricted to the immediate members of his/her family.

The wide spread face-to-face interactionⁱⁱ in the day-to-day living has important implications for the kind of relationships that is possible. The relationships becomes multi-layered, and it takes a multiplex dimension, which means a strain of relation that has happened in one dimension would easily spill into other dimension. For instance, since the people live in close proximity, their culture, eating habits, pattern of conversation etc are easily visible to others. If the eating habit of one household is not socially approved by the values of other, it is likely that a rumour could be easily spread around and such a household could be socially excluded by others in the settlement. The excluded household may be prevented to draw water from a common well, or even prevented from accessing to public schools etc. This multi-layered structure of existence in India is succinctly put by Rath et al (1993:16) as follows:

“The basic and primary unit of the society is the elementary or joint family. Every family belongs to an exogamous division of a caste and several such divisions constitute an endogamous caste or an endogamous section of a large caste. On the other hand, every family belongs to the community with whom it shares a settlement site, be it a village or a hamlet attached to a village. In socio-religious affairs control of the individual is threefold – that of his family, his village and his caste”.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Indian context, Beteille (1974) has shown that caste is to be considered as an important analytical category, besides class, to understand power structure. Anthropologists consider certain castes to be dominant, according to the numerical factor and the political and economic power that one caste is able to wield over other castes (Srinivas, 1966; Dumont, 1970; Oommen, 1984). Often, numerically, the majority of the population of a village are from a single caste.^{iv} This single caste could be the ‘dominant caste’ of the particular village. In addition to the numerical strength, economic power too

contributes to decide whether a caste is dominant (Mandelbaum, 1970). People from other castes too live in the same village. But, they would not be able to exert dominance in the village (Bhatia, 1974; Srinivas, 1955). In addition to this caste factor, religion plays a significant role in determining the social structure of rural India.

Urban-rural coexistence is another major challenge that modern India is facing. Education and upbringing in upper middle class contexts provides English medium education to a few elite minorities, while the vernacular medium education shapes the psyche of the large majority. The way their identity is formulated is through different pathways since the type of education shapes their views on country, history, self-perception and value system. These identities^v clash where they may be competing on resources or even working together.

The intermix of geographical and social settlement is also visible from the general division of Aryan and Dravidian cultures. Though the historical debate, that Aryan invasion pushed the Dravidians into the southern India, is not completely settled, the crux of the social settlement and the divide into North Indian population and South Indian population is clear and loud. The language deepens this divide. The south Indians who speak languages of Dravidian origin, and north Indians who speak languages of Sanskrit (or Aryan) origin is an important divide. However, these distinct identities, when working in a national framework of single constitution, and institutions such as parliament, courts, bureaucracy, corporate houses, living in the same neighbourhood etc, creates important dynamics. Even beyond the Dravidian-Aryan divide, between the states of India too there are important variations. For instance, since 1970s, there are important clashes between locals and migrants from other states in the cities of Mumbai, Kolkatta and Madras. The local people are averse to migrants from other states coming and occupying the jobs, and availing public services. These conflicts are rooted in the limited available resources and social identities of people. The ethnic violence for autonomy in Kashmir and Sri Lanka are also manifestations of conflict mediated through social identity.

Dissecting this identity from Indian philosophical perspective is essential to understand how relations are important in Indian context.

Hierarchies and ambiguities in relationship

A fine-graded social hierarchy dominates all types of inter-personal relationships in Indian context. The identity of other person (caste, religion, region, occupation etc) is recognisable from a few minutes of conversation and by knowing the surname. The interaction pattern changes even in formal contexts based on this (such as a claimant approaching a government official) (see Pellissery, 2007). Hierarchical interaction prevents scientific temper to prevail, and to give credit to the quality of the argument. Rather, it is the power structure and persons in higher hierarchies, whose opinions are valued and respected. Such an interaction becoming the dominant mode, in the patriarchal society, a woman's life has been often pictured as determined by man's choices: The oft-quoted verse reads: 'Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age'. Hierarchical relations are meant to 'protect'. However, when this protection slips into exploitation is unclear, but loud. For instance, a girl who may break caste solidarity and fall in love with a boy from another caste may be subjected to serious violence such as rape or parading her naked in the community. Such extreme violence is termed as communitarian justice. In similar way, teacher-student relationship is supposed to be sacred. With huge amount of respect given from student to the teacher, memorization by the student, of what teacher imparts, is an integral part of learning. Questioning and critical comments by the students are supposed to be questioning the hierarchy. Such a hierarchical relationship even justifies violence by the teacher on students.

In all the hierarchical relations, the tone of voice, body language, the way clothes are worn, all matters. The way by which such subtle differences are meticulously maintained indicate how the maintenance of hierarchy is done and subordination of some to others is systematically prevailed. Thus, relationships are patterned in such as way to

maintain inequalities in the society. However, an important factor that breaks this hierarchy is education. Various corners of India it has been pointed out those who are educated question the value of hierarchy. Sometimes, acquisition of education by the young persons and their questioning of the elders are perceived as inter-generational differences. However, in Indian context, it must also be viewed as tendency to transcend hierarchy based on age.

Tolerance has been proclaimed as one of the hallmark of Indian culture. This is another mechanism of relationship to maintain the diversity. At the same time, this facet reveals another ambiguous nature of relationships in India. Recent communal violences in India (between Hindu-Muslim; Hindu-Christian) have shown that tolerance between communities existed as long as both communities were equally in poor economic conditions.^{vi} Once a community progressed in economic realm or few members of one community converted to other community for economic gains, the tolerance broke down. Kakar (1996) has pointed out such origin of intolerance due to ‘identity-threat’ to the communities.

Identity: The building block of relationship

In the Western theories (of law, state and morality) a person, who could make choices is the key building block of society. This personhood is without any relation to others in the society. Here the individual exists relationally and “each needs the other antithetically” (Badrinath, 2000: 34). Indian conception of human being had a different orientation from this person-individual divide. While a conscious process of de-individualisation was considered as necessary for salvation, exercise of personal will was considered to be folly and thus was viewed with mistrust.^{vii} “India seeks for the combining and unifying factor within diversity and individuality. Her series and types are based on the dogma of an underlying unity beyond the accidental appearances of individuals and specific instances” (Heimann, 1964: 171). Thus, the original meaning of *per-sona* (in Latin)

indicating the mask through which the actor portrays a character (*sva-bhava*) comes closer to Indian understanding of human being.

In the West, two traditions played seminal role for its emergence: First, through American social psychology Mead (1937) and Goffman (1969) used identity as a principle of social organization. Second, in the psychoanalytic tradition Erikson (1968) used identity as the key principle around which personality is organized. Both these traditions dealt with the way identity of the individual was shaped through socialization process.^{viii} The political aspect of identity formation, and dialogical relationship between individual and collective identity came to the academic discourse through anthropological discourse in 1980s and 1990s (Hall, 1990; Kymlicka, 1995). Rather than ascribed identity, (Taylor 1989) identifies six sources of identity: sociological, occupational, geo-basic, national, co-cultural and ethnic). For examples, in India, 4693 communities derive identity on the basis of environment, religion, language, places of settlement and occupations. Apart from these there are identities such as illiterate, poor etc.

At the bottom of these conceptual debates lies the distinction between 'objective characteristics' *vs* 'subjective acceptance of these characteristics'. These objective characteristics could be internalized in various levels by the individual, and it could be interpreted through (understood by) knowing the belief of the person as to how far s/he considers s/he belongs to the social group. External manifestations of this belonging could be observed through the behavioral adaptations to match the generally followed trend of the social group. What is the exact internalization process or experience involved in the transition from self to group identity or group membership, particularly when the multiple identities come on the way of Individual?

It is here we confront the idea of identity as the 'boundary of separation' and 'boundary of relation'. We are able to understand the concept of identity more clearly when we realize that 'separating' and 'relating' are not opposing activities, but two sides of the same coin. I create walls of separation through creating (relating in a meaningful way) certain identity, and such an activity determines whom I want to relate with. Here,

identity is to be understood as choice, and not as 'substance, essence or tradition' since the agency of the individual to refuse the definitions of social roles are at play (Touraine, 1988). It is in this context of multiple identities bringing the role of individual agency into the play that Cohen (1994: 11) suggested identity as "a basket of selves which come to the surface at different social moments as appropriate".

Although quite a lot of insights on identity formation are from Western Psychological tradition like Erikson (1960), the life-cycle development in Indian tradition may not be neglected while explaining 'identity' in India. The works of Kakar (1979), Paranjpe (1975) and Roland (1988) provide insights into identity formation in traditional Indian culture. The development of 'we-self' (Roland, 1988) for children in traditional Hindu joint families make them a member of the family and help them to identify with the joint family system, where the muffling of the personal interests for the sake of family interest takes place. Thus traditional families in India provide a foundation stone for the later social identification process and the collective behaviour/group behaviour among the citizens. The Indian understanding of divine through *-advaita* or non-divisiveness of reality – is the basis of this type of nurturing the relationship with others in great importance. With the attainment of *Brahma-jnana* (divine knowledge), which gives a sense of equality distinction of any kind disappears, and rather than individuals and persons, *types* emerge as social units. This sense of type as social unit is the key foundation for the collective identity. The implication of the collective identity is de-emphasising individual dignity and differentiation. Thus, the strain of relationship may easily be experienced. For instance, if loan is not given for the business of brother, it will not be morally approved since individual progress by accumulation may not be encouraged. Thus, being forced to think like the group and the danger for entrepreneurship could be observed.

An economy that runs on relationships

Indian economy is characterised by its informality. About 90% of the population make their livelihood in the informal sectors. This is also primarily because about 60% of

the population make their living based on agriculture. The exchange relations in the agrarian activities – labour, loans, irrigation arrangements, marketing of products – are all informalised and these are mostly carried out through kinship or geographical neighbours. Formal markets and credits are limited, and failure of agriculture (due to lack of rain or any other) may result in strain of relationships since lack of repayment of loan is a breach of trust. Thus, series of suicides that took place in India due to agrarian distress has also to be viewed as misplaced trust and shame leading to human calamity.

Even in the urban context, informal economy dominates. Most of the Indian businesses are owned and managed by families. Baniyas, Aggarwals, Guptas, the Chettiars, Parsees, Gujarati Jains, Muslim Khojas, Kutchi Memons, Marwaris, Maheshwaris, Oswals, Porwals and Khandelwals are well-known groups of family businesses. Some of the well-known names in the Indian corporate world, such as Ambanis, Tatas, Birlas, Bajaj, Singhania, Modis are also rooted in the family businesses. Most of these businesses have not come to an established scenario as to how to distinguish between what is in the interest of a family and what in the interest of a company (Das, 1999). The internal family feud has affected the businesses and shareholders. Some of such family businesses have been split up and formed into different ventures. However, the high trust with which the operations are possible in this framework has shown that there is great saving on the transaction cost.

Informal economy is also visible in the small-scale business operations. My work on the social network of street vendors (Pellissery & Paul, 2007) has shown that breaking of a relationship determines the success or failure of a business. As many as seven types of relationships are woven together to make the business of street vending in the Southern states of India. Taking this view, both from rural and urban areas, what is important to be observed is that commodification of labour (disembedding of labour from the individuals) has not yet taken place in Indian context.^{ix} As a result, labour relations are mediated through traditional power equations in the society.

In the informal economy, getting a job is a matter of relationship. The qualifications of the candidate and the requirements of the employer all could be compromised as long as relationship could be maintained. Since trust is an important element in such occasions of gaining job, corruption around gaining jobs remain a close secret. As a result, the bureaucracies, military forces, universities all of them get a colour of the social since the recruitment itself has been coloured through relationships (Wade, 1985).

The informal economy also has important implications for the social security or the arrangement of living after work life. Informal economy forces a care economy, since the social security arrangements are informal and family-based. There are few institutional arrangements to take care of the infirm and the weak (Vera-Sanso, 2004). As a result, home care is the predominant mode of social security. However, households are not homogeneous. Understanding the heterogeneity is essential to understand the power distribution (Bruce & Lloyd, 1997) and thus the social security available based on the relationships. In most of the Indian languages the term for 'house' also stands for 'home'. For example, the term *ghar* can be translated "equally well as 'house', meaning the habitation; as 'household', meaning the socio-economic living arrangements; and as 'family' meaning the network of power and emotional attachment" (Glushkova & Feldhaus, 1998: 5). There are variety of arrangements for habitation, socio-economic living and power relations. For example, it has also been pointed out that adult sons, after their marriage, often live apart in adjacent premises as a separate household for privacy, and all such separate households together are also referred as 'home' (Vera-Sanso, 2004). Therefore, interpretations of availability of informal care could differ by which meaning the household is referred to.

An average Indian household size is 5.3. But, often, households are differentiated depending on how many generations live together. It is assumed that old parents in traditional societies live in three-generation joint families. This assumption is often not realistic, and in the context of younger generation migrating to cities, it is likely that older

parents may be left alone in a house in the villages. Reliance on such informal supports for social security brings gendered dimensions to relationships (Dasgupta, 1993). Thus, where the men lived on to old age, they had the support from their wife in the household dynamics. Culturally too Indian men depended on the women for maintenance than some one else (Sivamurthy & Wadakannavar, 2001). But, women in their old age find there is no one to depend on.

This inter-relationship between economy and relationships show that livelihoods are based on relations, rather than commodities or resources. Even the risk is mitigated through relations. For instance, in Bangladesh the collective credit groups or self-help groups thrived in which loan repayment was done on group insurance, and the mutual trust forced the individual members to pay up the loans in time. Such a pattern spread to most of the South Asian countries in a successful fashion. In similar way, many of the farmers resorted to cooperative farming and cooperative dairying to address the risk of multi-national corporate houses in the business. These instances raise the question as to whether deprivation and inequality foster relationships in positive way or not.

Politics of the poor: Relations determine well-being

Gift giving is a typical expression for solidarity in Indian culture. Most of the life events such as birth ceremonies, marriage, death all of them have elaborate set of gifts those are to be given to each other among relatives, neighbours and friends. As Marcel (1929) has put such gifts bring moral obligations, and reciprocity is implied. Gift giving among equals is often reciprocated through gifts. However, in the country like India, gift giving between higher and lower classes are reciprocated through pre-understood obligations (often in a work based relationship). For instance, a landowner would provide huge gift for the tenant during a marriage of tenant's daughter. The tenant would need to spend longer hours in the farm to express increased loyalty or reciprocate in similar way. Inability to 'measure' the implications of such gifts often gives way for strain of relationships and quarrels. Some of the gifting systems are institutionalised to benefit the

poor people. For instance, during the month of Ramadan, Muslim community provides monetary gifts, such as grains, money or clothes, (*Zakat*) for the poorest Muslim household in the community, and that household is able to gain sustenance through this.

In 1980s there was an interesting debate among sociologists as to whether poverty induce collective action. Obviously, there were arguments from both sides and consensus was not possible. The debate, however, documented evidences from various parts of the world as to how poor people came together to fight oppression and structural injustices. India is one of the finest examples in this scenario, where social capital has been used to circumvent the economic inequalities. The social mobilisation, particularly the Gandhian model of protest through mass mobilisation has created relationships around social issues. This is evidenced through movements such as Naxalism, soft-terrorisms, environment group activisms and protest against displacements. In all the cases, the group that comes together experience injustice from the state or wider market forces. People come together, often being coordinated through a charismatic figure, to fight against a force, which they would not have been able to do as immobilised individuals.

Another important development that has taken place in recent times in the Indian politics is the mobilisation of the social groups, and lower castes into vote banks. Near the time of elections, the social groups organise public meetings in common spaces, which are often attended by the political leaders. Often, the fixing of a candidate for election is by taking into consideration the social composition of a particular constituency.^x In some of the Indian states, chief ministers have come to such positions through caste politics (Jayal, 2001). As a matter of fact, such mobilisations have been part of Indian history. Sikhism was mobilised among the lower caste as a protest against injustices within Hinduism. Amedkar movement was aimed to bring emancipation for the lower castes to correct social and economic inequalities.

What is much more prominent is the formation of civil society institutions in the form of Non-Governmental Organisations in structured manner to work for development organisations. Often they are also called non-profit organisations. It is estimated that

there are 1.18 million such organisations existing in India alone (Manna, 2007). The sheer existence of such a large number of organisations indicate how easily people come together to agree on some plan of action. What is important to be noted about such civil society activities is also that, these are not exceptions to the social identities. For instance, in small towns of north India, there may be a group of people migrated from the southern state of Kerala. Their population in a small town may be about 200 households. These households may come together to celebrate a region specific festival. At the same time, this small migrant group may be further divided into different religions or castes (e.g. Kerala Christian Association, Ayyapa Samaj, SNDP etc). Multiplicity of such civil society organisations makes social exclusion almost impossible. Thus, even if poverty may be deeply persisting, even poor people are included in some form of organisation or another.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give an overview of the relationship patterns across a variety of contexts in India. Urban-rural divide and the face-to-face relationship with neighbours in most of the human settlements define the nature of intense relationships. In the Indian context, such relationships are fostered within the framework of a hierarchy (both social and economic). Reciprocity in the hierarchical context is not equivalent, and as a result ambiguity exists. Beyond such close-knit existence, Indian philosophical uniqueness of viewing the individual as a proto-type of collectivity redefines the way an individual is prompted to relate with others. This has implications for the informal economy in India, which runs on the basis of informal contracts, created on the basis on relationships. Countering this economic view of the reality is the coming together of the poor people to collectively fight, protest or claim their legitimate rights which is another aspect of relationships induced by abject mass poverty in India.

Earliest Indian sacred literature – *Upanishads* – pointed out that the face of ‘the truth can’t be hidden by the golden plate’. In other words, money or resources cannot

stifle the truth. What Upanishads does not tell is what hides the face of the truth. The above overview of relationship patterns, particularly that of collective identity, indicates that close-knit relations suffocate individual interests, and thus offering a challenge to prevail the truth. Often, more than money, relationships matter. Two friends compete each other to pay up the bill for each other after sharing a meal in a hotel. However, deeper examination of the collective identity, questions the possibility of fairness to prevail. Such collective identity, and relationship patterns within it, protects the vested interests of the dominant voice of the collectivity.

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ⁱ It is calculated that average floor space available for the people living in South Asia are awesomely low. Compare the figures of Dhaka (2.7 sq.m.), Lahore (1.2 sq.m.), and Mumbai (3.5 sq.m.) with that of cities in UK (34.8 sq.m.) and Australia (55 sq.m.) (World Bank, 2000).

ⁱⁱ Some scholars have preferred to call these relationships as 'back to back relationships' because of the petty politics that can take place amongst the persons who interact everyday through strategies such as hiding information and ditching one another.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is based on Dube's (1955) work on the *Indian Village*.

^{iv} This is second in the traditional caste classification of *Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra*. *Manusmriti's* prescription of penalties for the same crime within the same *varna* or class units were identical, but they differed when different *varnas* or class units were involved. These differences were systematic: the higher the caste of the victim, the greater was the punishment (Sharma, 2006). This is a different version of the paradoxical concept of equality in Keynesian welfare state: "equality is, and should be *stratified* (emphasis in original). All persons within a given stratum should be treated equally, but here is no necessity to treat people equally across strata" (O'brien and Penna, 1998: 41).

^v Some scholars term these differences as *Bharat vs India*.

^{vi} See Harriss-White (2004) for the economic basis of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. See (Basudeva, 2008) for economic roots of communal violence in Orissa between Hindus and Christians.

^{vii} In Buddhism, personality was considered to be aggregate of physical and psychological attributes or five *skandhas* (Badrinath, 2000).

^{viii} "When one has identity, he is situated – that is, cast in the shape of a social object – by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in social relations. One's identity is established when others place him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or announces. It is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self" (Turner, 1987).

^{ix} Classical work in this regard is Breman's (1993) work about the relationship between high caste land owners and lower caste labourers. The ability to protest, despite of exploitation of labour, is limited for the lower caste labourers, and the patronage relationships dominate the labour relations.

^x Such fixing of candidate who is able to represent majority of the social groups gives social legitimacy to the candidate on the one hand. On the other hand, such a candidate will act as a broker between central/state government to funnel resources to the political constituency. Such brokers and fixers could be found at every realm of the society in India. There are brokers to get job, to give application for government assistance, brokers for marriage, brokers for buying property, brokers for settling disputes, brokers for gaining compensation after accidents etc. The ability to 'fix' the interests of the competing interests of different parties is the key function of these brokers.