

Structure of Indian Society: Demographic Structure and Rural-Urban Dynamics

I. Introduction to Demography and Social Structure

The study of Indian society begins with an understanding of its **demographic structure**, which refers to the systematic study of the population.

The term 'demography' is of Greek origin, derived from *demos* (people) and *graphein* (describe), literally meaning the description of people.

While the population is composed of unrelated individuals, it functions as a society made up of distinct but interlinked classes and communities regulated by institutions like **caste, tribe, and family**.

Sociologists distinguish between two varieties of demography: **formal demography**, which is a quantitative field concerned with counting and enumeration, and **social demography**, which focuses on the social, economic, or political aspects of populations.

It is crucial to understand that demographic data, such as death rates or birth rates, are not merely sums of individual events but are **social phenomena** that must be explained at the social level.

For example, Emile Durkheim's study of suicide rates demonstrated that even highly personal acts are influenced by social causes.

II. The Demographic Structure of Indian Society

1. Key Concepts and Measures

The demographic structure is defined by several vital processes and ratios that determine the nature of a society:

- **Age Structure:** This refers to the relative proportions of men, women, and different age groups in a population. Development usually leads to improved quality of life and higher **life expectancy**, resulting in an "ageing"

population where older age groups increase while younger groups shrink.

- **Dependency Ratio:** This is a measure comparing the portion of the population composed of dependents (those below 15 and above 64 years) with the working-age group (15 to 64 years).
- **Demographic Dividend:** India currently benefits from a "demographic dividend" because it has a very young population and a falling dependency ratio. This means there is a larger proportion of workers relative to non-workers, which can be a source of economic growth if supported by appropriate policies.



2. Regional Variations in Growth and Age Structure

India's population is projected to become the most populous in the world, but this growth is not uniform across regions.

- **High Growth States:** States like **Uttar Pradesh and Bihar** are projected to contribute significantly to population growth up to 2041, representing 28% of the projected

growth. These states have high proportions of younger age groups.

- **Low Growth States:** States like **Kerala and Tamil Nadu** have age structures more similar to developed countries, with lower fertility rates and a higher proportion of aged individuals.
- **Regional Shares:** While the Hindi belt (UP, Bihar, MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh) accounts for a massive share of projected growth, the southern states (AP, Telangana, TN, Kerala, Karnataka) together account for about 16%.

3. Literacy and Gender

Literacy is a critical component of the demographic structure. Since 1951, literacy rates in India have increased from 18.3% to **73% in 2011**.

However, a significant **male-female gap** persists; while male literacy was 80.9% in 2011, female literacy was 64.6%.

Furthermore, the **child sex ratio** is a cause for concern, with states like Haryana showing incredibly low ratios (under 800 females per 1000 males), reflecting deep-seated social prejudices.

III. Rural-Urban Linkages and Divisions

1. The Rural-Urban Shift

Historically, India has been a primarily rural society, and as of the 2011 Census, **68.8% of the population** still lives in rural areas. However, there is a steady trend toward **urbanisation**, with the urban population increasing from 10.8% in 1901 to **31.2% in 2011**.

For the first time since independence, the absolute increase in population has been higher in urban areas than in rural areas due to declining growth rates in villages and sustained growth in cities.

2. Defining Rural and Urban Divisions

The division between rural and urban is not just about numbers; it involves a shift in the "way of life".

- **Rural Society:** Characterised by an **agrarian way of life** where land is the most important productive resource and form of property. Many cultural practices, such as New Year festivals (Bihu, Pongal, Baisakhi), are rooted in the harvest cycle.
- **Urban Society:** Characterised by industrial-urban systems and service industries. It is divided by consumption patterns and residence (e.g., textile mill owners in Juhu vs. workers in Girangaon) but united by common city infrastructures and mass media.

3. Rural-Urban Linkages

The boundaries between rural and urban areas are increasingly blurred through several linkages:

- **Migration:** Cities, especially metropolises, attract migrants from rural areas and small towns. In Delhi, for instance, 52% of the population came from the Hindi belt, with 47% of those having a rural background.
- **Economic Integration:** The rural sector in states like Kerala has been transformed into a **mixed economy** integrated with retail sales, services, and remittances from abroad.
- **Communication Media:** Mass media, particularly Indian language newspapers like *Malayala Manorama* or *Eenadu*, cater to rural and small-town needs by introducing local, district, and block-level editions.
- **Encompassing Villages:** Many towns and cities have physically grown to encompass surrounding villages, turning them into "**urban villages**" where the land is no longer agricultural, but the social structure often retains village-like characteristics.



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The graphic shows a student sitting at a desk with a laptop and smartphone, surrounded by books and a potted plant. The background is a stylized cityscape with a blue and orange color scheme.

For example, in 2011-12, 45.3% of Scheduled Tribes in rural areas lived below the poverty line compared to 15.5% of the "Forward Castes". Urban OBCs often face socio-economic conditions closer to those of Scheduled Castes than to the upper castes.

3. Markets and Globalisation

The market is a powerful social institution that drives change. In modern India, the brand of cell phone or car one owns acts as a **status symbol**, marking socio-economic position.

Globalisation has further interlinked local and international markets, creating a class of upwardly mobile professionals in cities while simultaneously causing displacement in rural and tribal areas through large-scale development projects.

IV. Social Institutions and Inequality within the Structure

1. Agrarian Structure and Caste

In rural India, there is a complex relationship between **caste and class**.

- **Dominant Castes:** Sociologist M.N. Srinivas used this term to describe intermediate castes that are numerically large and own a substantial amount of land, giving them economic and political power (e.g., Jats in UP, Vokkaligas in Karnataka, Reddis in Andhra Pradesh).
- **Landless Labourers:** Most marginal farmers and landless labourers belong to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or OBCs. Historically, Dalits were often not allowed to own land, creating a labour force for the dominant castes.

2. Urban Inequality and Poverty

Inequality persists in the urban structure as well. While the "Upper" caste Hindus have a higher percentage of affluent members, **Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes** have the highest proportions of members living below the poverty line in both rural and urban areas.