Module 3  Social Structure and Social Change

Lecture 18
Rural-Urban Continuum: Meaning and Context

Conventionally, rural-urban continuum proposes a linear depiction of the contrasting natures of social relationships characteristic of rural and urban settlements. This was a popular conceptual tool to classify different types of community and the transition between them. It arose from early 20th century sociology attempting to understand the social changes consequent upon rapid urbanization. Life in the countryside occurred in small, geographically isolated settlements which were socially homogeneous, with high levels of mutual communication and social solidarity, and which changed very slowly. Urban communities were attributed the opposite characteristics: L. Louis Wirth of the Chicago School, in his highly influential essay ‘Urbanism as a Way of Life’ (American Journal of Sociology, 1938), thought cities distinctive because they were large, dense and heterogeneous and that this produced the transient, disorderly, anonymous and formal associational relationships of urban living.

Such understandings had affinities with Ferdinand Tonnies’ a-spatial distinction between gemeinschaft (community) and gesellschaft (association). In principle, if all settlements could be placed on such a continuum we would have a strong account of spatial arrangement influenced social life.

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. Robert Redfield has given the concept of rural-urban continuum on the basis of his study of Mexican peasants of Tepoztlain. 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 have differentiated 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.

Another view regarding rural and urban communities has been given by Pocock who believe that both village and city are elements of the same civilization and hence neither rural-urban dichotomy, nor continuum is meaningful.

M. S. A. Rao points out in the Indian context that although both village and town formed part of the same civilization characterized by institution of kinship and caste system in pre-British India, there were certain specific institutional forms and organizational ways distinguishing social and cultural life in towns form that in village.

G. S. Ghurye believes that urbanization is migration of people from village to city and the impact it has on the migrants and their families.
Maclver remarks that though the communities are normally divided into rural and urban the line of demarcation is not always clear between these two types of communities. There is no sharp demarcation to tell where the city ends and country begins. Every village possesses some elements of the city and every city carries some features of the village.

Ramkrishna Mukherjee prefers the continuum model by talking of the degree of urbanization as a useful conceptual tool for understanding rural-urban relations.

P. A. Sorokin and Zimmerman, in 'Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology’, have stated that the factors distinguishing rural from urban communities include occupation, size and density of population as well as mobility, differentiation and stratification.

However, subsequent research largely undermined that idea. Spatial arrangements themselves are not determinant of social relations; even if some parts of cities are rather anarchic, more, for instance the suburbs, do not conform to the model. One can also find traditional and interpersonally intimate relationships in cities, as exemplified by the working class community of Bethnal Green by Michael Young, and conflicts and isolation in the countryside. Moreover, both city and village contain culturally distinct groups, suggesting that there are no dominant cultural forms typical of settlement type and that settlement type does not determine the character of interpersonal social ties.

References


Questions

1. What do you understand by rural-urban continuum?

2. Identify the distinction between gemeinschaft (community) and gesellschaft (association).

3. Explain MacIver’s perspective on the rural-urban continuum.