

Main Features of Urban Life

A close examination of the dominant features of urban life shows that there are significant differences between those who live in cities and those in rural areas. Louis Wirth has described the principal features of urban life. Urban values discussed by Louis Wirth and other sociologists in their studies of urbanism in western countries are not yet completely predominant in India. We can say that they are beginning to take roots in Indian cities.

Thus, in the Indian context, the following description is not wholly relevant. It is being given here for the purpose of familiarising you with the following features generally associated with urban life. Another purpose is to urge you to find out for yourself to what extent you can observe these features in Indian city-life.

Formality and Impersonality of Human Relationships

Large size of urban areas prevents intimate and face-to-face contacts among all the members in the community. In urban communities, people interact with each other for limited and specialised purposes, for example, teachers and students in a classroom, buyers and sellers in a store and doctors and patients in clinics. Urbanites do not usually come to know each other as 'whole persons, they are not usually concerned with all aspects of a person's life. Apart from their family members and friends they do not normally interact with others, except for limited or specialised purposes. This feature among the urban dwellers results in formal, impersonal, superficial, transitory, segmental and secondary contacts. This is in contrast to the primary contacts of people in villages who share personal, face-to-face, intimate, longstanding relationships with each other.

Rationality

With the impersonal nature of urban relationships, the urban orientations tend to be utilitarian. That is, people then enter into relationships, after calculating potential gains from these associations rather than for the intrinsic satisfaction of association. Here relationships are generally of contractual kind where profit and loss are carefully evaluated. Once the contract is over, the relationship between the people tends to end, as for example, in having the services of a trained nurse for a sick person, or entering into a contract with an agency to advertise your product, etc. This should however not give you an impression that all relationships between individuals in urban areas are only utilitarian. Always, there exists a wide range of variety in individual relationships. Here, we are only pointing out the general character of urban relationships.

Secularism

Heterogeneity of physical such as racial, social and cultural elements in urban results in routine exposure to divergent life styles and values. People become more tolerant of differences as they become accustomed to seeing others very different from themselves. This rational and tolerant attitude produces secular orientations in life. Even though it is very difficult to measure concepts such as rationality and secularism, it is assumed that secular as opposed to religious orientations have often been thought to be associated with urban social structure. However, this feature is not always present since we do find communal riots taking place in Indian cities more often than in rural areas. But generally, in a relative sense, we can say that secular values are associated with urban areas.

Increased Specialisation and Division of Labour

Population growth leads to a higher ratio of people to land, called 'material density' by Emile Durkheim.

He differentiated two types of density, namely-

- Material density, that is, simple ratio of people to land and
- Dynamic or moral density, that is, the rate of interaction, or communication within a population.

In his theory of social development, Durkheim viewed tribes or families as the basic social units in pre-industrial or pre-urban societies. When they grow in size both their material and dynamic densities also increase simultaneously. This results in greater interaction between formerly separated social units. Trade and commerce between units serve as stimulus to the division of labour. In other words, when similar but separated social units are fused by increased interaction into a larger and denser settlement, the new and larger units exhibit more specialisation in terms of the division of labour than that found in some of the previously separate units.

Decline in the Functions of Family

Many of the educational, recreational and other functions, performed within a rural joint family context, are taken over by other institutions such as schools, clubs and other voluntary organisations in the urban social context. In urban society there is generally a clear demarcation between the home and place of work, which is not always found in rural society. Correspondingly, at a psychological level urban dwellers' identity are not necessarily bound with their family roles. And also because, of' greater geographical mobility, regular contact between kin is often difficult if not impossible in these families. This however, does not suggest that families are not vital in urban societies. Having discussed the general features of urban social structure, it is not out of place to mention that the dichotomy emphasising rural-urban contrasts used by many western scholars is of little value for understanding urban social structure in India. Many studies completed during the fifties and sixties questioned the usual

assumption that the process of urbanisation led to decline of family size, weakening of family ties, especially joint family and secularisation of caste and religious values, deeply rooted in Indian culture.