Commentary

A scale to measure socio-economic status in urban & rural communities in India

The measure of a social fact, phenomenon or psychological construct is often found difficult and the outcome viewed subjectively. Such a required measurement scale is not available, if available, not accessible, lacks reliability and predictive value often compelling the scholar to choose a shortcut without realizing the damage to the credibility of enquiry results that are likely to emerge. Thus, the development of a sensitive, valid and reliable measurement scale is a serious and demanding work where expertise in diverse fields like socio-metric, psycho-metric or econometric provides critical inputs and not many scholars have it. Both for a limited, small scale or micro level investigation or large scale surveys, the development, standardization and use of a scale cannot be over emphasized.

Further, a social fact, phenomenon or a particular behaviour originates from a particular circumstance or combination of circumstances that has a definite social context with a number of variables. Some of these have direct association while other indirect relationship with the phenomenon or behaviour. Measurement of such phenomena or behaviours is thus often carried out without adequate objectivity and accuracy without considering their contextual variables. For example, the socio-economic status (SES) of a community is influenced by several variables like the composition of the type of people, resources, their age, family size, health, literacy, occupation, income, wealth, possession of materials, life style, etc. Thus, any data generated on these variables with the help of direct questions may not provide objective information and true measure of the SES but a blurred picture as people often do not report their actual income, resources, wealth, etc. It could be seen in every day life that some individuals lead a very lavish life but their resources and reported income do not commensurate with that. On the other hand, some individuals are poor, could be ill but pretend not to be so. Our tools and techniques applied in survey method for large or small studies fail to yield accurate or reliable information for any assessment or understanding the cause-effect relationship for a health or development programme. Somehow, we go for our purpose with such assessment compromising that it is approximate - near to the fact.

In order to overcome this problem of true measure of SES, several efforts have been made to develop SES scales: Rahudkar scale-1960, Kuppuuswami scale 1962, Udaiparikh scale 1964, Shirpurkar scale 1967, Jalota scale 1970, Kulsherestha scale 1972, Srivastava scale 1978, Bharadwaj scale 2001. However, social transformation and fast changing economy have rendered these scales ineffective in measuring the SES over the years and across the population groups in the country. These may not be used as culture-free scales. Further, growing agrarian economy, population movements across cities, states and countries have increased, putting the family economy on faster change. These scales do not hold relevance to contemporary socio-economic structure of the country. But what has been happening along side is growing demand for a reliable SES scale.

Inspired with the problem of SES measurement and felt need of researchers, for a measurement reliable scale, Dr Tiwari and his group at King George’s Medical University, Lucknow, got engaged in filling the void by developing the present scale to measure SES of urban and rural communities in India which has been standardized and found effective in the contemporary
scenario of economic development and improving quality of life (being published in this issue)⁹. This scale has been developed and administered on adequate subjects in different parts of the country for making it valid and reliable as well as 'culture free' for measuring SES of individuals, families, a population group or community in the country. Some of the important features of this scale include: (i) The contents of the scale are based on available literature, opinion of the experts as well as the community. These were obtained through a field study involving areas from all the five zones-North, South, East, West and Central of the country; (ii) the suitability and applicability of the scale have been tried and tested for its content validity and predictive validity in all the five zones of the country and found to be of very high degree; (iii) for quantification of measurements, nothing has been left to the interviewer to introduce any bias, advertently or inadvertently; (iv) there is provision of updating the scale to maintain its high validity. This updating is contemplated depending upon changes in socio-economic profiles. This will always keep the scale relevant and useful; (v) to eliminate any bias in reporting by the respondents, a check has been incorporated in the present scale in the form of a visual analogue scale (VAS). When the reported socio-economic status by the respondents match with that of the interviewer’s observed socio-economic status on VAS, only then final socio-economic class is assigned to respondents/families; (vi) the administration of the scale takes about 12 to 15 minutes time; and (vii) the scale can be used in any setting for large community surveys, small scale studies including thesis work for post graduate, Ph.D., D.Sc. degree courses.

The scale is expected to contribute towards true measure of socio-economic status in the country to be carried out by different level of researchers and help fill the much needed void in this important area of socio-economic study of the population.

R.N. Gupta
Former Dy Director-General & Chief of Social & Behavioural Research Unit
Indian Council of Medical Research
Ansari Nagar, New Delhi, India
e-mail : guptarn@hotmail.com

References
1. Rahudkar WB. A scale for measuring socio-economic status of Indian farm families. *Nay Agril Coll Mag* 1960, 34: