

Village

The village occupies an important place in the social and cultural landscape of contemporary India. Notwithstanding India's significant industrialization over the last 5-6 decades and a considerable increase in its urban population, a majority of Indians continue to live in its more than 5 lakh villages and remain dependent on agriculture directly or indirectly. According to the 2001 census, rural India accounted for nearly 72% of India's total population. Similarly, though the share of agriculture has come down to around one-fourth of the total national income, nearly half of India's working population is directly employed in the agriculture sector.

Apart from it being an important demographic and structural reality characterizing contemporary India, the village has also been an important ideological category, a category through which India has been imagined in traditional and modern times. As Andre Beteille writes, "The village was not really a place where people lived, it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilization".

Colonial Discourse

Charles Metcalfe in his celebrated remark stated that, "The Indian village communities were little republics, having nearly everything they wanted within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seemed to last where nothing else lasted. Dynasty after dynasty tumbled down, revolution succeeded revolution but the village community remained the same." Please note that the British administrators encouraged village study primarily because they wanted to understand Indian society so as to govern it efficiently. Though not all colonial administrators shared Metcalfe's assessment of the Indian village, it nevertheless became the most popular and influential representation of India.

The Indian village in the colonial discourse was a self-sufficient community with communal ownership of land and was marked by a functional integration of various occupational groups. Things as diverse as stagnation, simplicity and social harmony were attributed to the village which was taken to be the basic unit of Indian civilization. However, this was a highly exaggerated opinion because village community was organized as per caste hierarchy and was marked by caste oppression and conflict. Further, village community was not completely self-sufficient as it depended for its needs on the neighbouring communities. Even the idea of static or stagnant village community doesn't seem to be plausible.

A large number of village studies were published during the decades of 1950s and 1960s. These studies showed for the first time the relevance of field-work based understanding of Indian society or what came to be known as the field view of India different from the then dominant book view of India which was developed by Indologists and Orientalists from classic Hindu scriptures. After the colonial administrators, it was the young discipline of social anthropology that took up the study of the India village during 1950s and 1960s in a big way. This new interest in village social life was a direct offshoot of the newly emerged interest in the study of the peasantry. Some important case studies conducted during 1950s and 1960s are:

India's Villages (1955) by M.N. Srinivas
Village India (1955) by McKim Marriott
Rural Profiles (1955) by D.N. Majumdar
Indian Village (1955) by S.C. Dube

Nationalist Discourse

Gandhi argued that if India is to attain true freedom then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. According to Gandhi, real India lives in villages and his model of development was thus village centred. However, Nehru had a different view. According to Nehru, a village, normally speaking is backward, intellectually and culturally, and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Nehru favoured an urban centred and industry based modern India. The nationalists attributed the backwardness of villages to the colonial rule. In their anti-colonial struggle, they focused on addressing the grievances of peasants related to land tenure, rack-renting etc. This also facilitated in broadening the base of national freedom struggle.

During the post-independence period, there was a virtual explosion of village studies in the 1960s and 1970s primarily to facilitate the formulation of rural development programmes and the integration of rural masses in the national economy. These studies justify that for modernization and development of India a holistic view of Indian society is a must. These studies greatly facilitated economic planners in formulation of economic policies. One of the significant features of these villages studies was that they were largely based on 'field work approach' and conducted through participant observation method. Thus, the studies helped in creating a more realistic appreciative picture of village life. It was realised through these empirical studies that village community is not completely isolated as was highlighted in colonial discourse rather it was a part of regional network for both social and economic reasons.

But most of these studies were carried out by people who were functionalists. These studies over emphasised on unity, harmony and solidarity aspect. For instance, William Wiser in his classic study *The Hindu Jajmani System*, first published in 1936, had conceptualized the Indian village in the framework of 'reciprocity'. The framework of reciprocity implied that, though village social organisation was hierarchical, it was the interdependence among different caste groups that characterized the underlying spirit of the Indian village. Reciprocity implied, explicitly or implicitly, an exchange of equal services and non-exploitative relations. Mutual gratification was supposed to be the outcome of reciprocal exchange.

However, not everyone emphasised the unity of the village, the way Srinivas, Dube or Wiser did. Some of the anthropologists explicitly contested the *unity thesis* while others qualified their arguments by recognizing the conflicts within the village and the ties that villagers had with the outside world. For example, Paul Hiebert in his study of a South Indian village, although arguing that the caste system provided a source of stability to the village, also underlined the fact that deep seated cleavages underlie the apparent unity of the village, and fragmented it into numerous social groups. Similarly, Andre Beteille had argued that in his study of the Sripuram village, the village as a whole constituted a unit in a physical sense and to a much lesser extent in the social sense.

Among those who nearly rejected the idea of the communitarian unity were Oscar Lewis and F.G. Bailey. Lewis argued that the jajmani relations in village India are marked by socio-economic and political dominance and dependence. Lewis highlights the exploitative relationships among caste groups in jajmani relations. Similarly, Bailey highlighted the faction-ridden village community which was divided on caste and class lines.

These two alternative models of village community as offered by the functionalists and conflict theorists are complementary to each other and facilitate our comprehensive understanding of village life. These studies also enriched sociology by contributing a number of concepts like Sanskritization, dominant caste, harmonic and disharmonic system etc. These studies also provided a corrective to the earlier views which were more based on textual sources by presenting the field view of village life. However, being empirical studies, these largely relied on participant observation method. These studies often represented the views of the dominant castes as due to field limitations researchers, at times, could not reach the marginalised sections, such as lower castes, minorities, etc.