SOCIOLOGY/ANTHROPOLOGY, NATION AND THE "VILLAGE COMMUNITY"

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The study of "village community" has undoubtedly been the single most important preoccupation with the sociologists and social anthropologists working on/in India. Though it was during the British colonial rule that India was first imagined as a land of "village republics", the sociologists and social anthropologists, who carried-out the 'village studies' during 1950s and 1960s, also saw the essence of India being located in the village. There was something obvious about the "village" being the primary unit of the Indian civilization. For a long time, the village was regarded as a "natural" entry point to the understanding of the traditional Indian society and for documenting the patterns of its social organization. It was the ultimate signifier of the authentic native life, a place where one could see or observe the "real" India and develop an understanding of the way local people organized their social relationships and belief systems. The institutional patterns and cultural values of the village society were assumed to be typical examples of the "traditional" Indian society. As Beteille argued, 'the village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilization' (Beteille 1980:108).

Though the village has been a popular subject of research among all the social sciences in India, it is with the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology that the 'village-studies' have mostly been identified. Sociologists and social anthropologists carried out a large number of 'village-studies' in different parts of India during the 1950s and 1960s. The publication of these studies also marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Indian social sciences. They, for the first time, showed the relevance of a fieldwork based understanding of the Indian society. Apart from popularizing the method of qualitative fieldwork of modern social anthropology, the 'village-studies' played a crucial role in institutionalizing the twin disciplines in the Indian university system.

Basing their accounts on "participant observations" mostly carried out by the social anthropologists themselves while staying with the community over a long period of time in a single village, they offered, what has come to be known as the "field-view" of India. Undertaking a village-study and providing an account of the village social life was not just an exercise to be carried out by a university under-graduate in a remote village for the award of a doctoral degree. For most of them, particularly for the social anthropologists of Indian origin, doing a village study meant much more. These studies were carried-out almost immediately after India's independence from the colonial rule when post-independence India was trying to develop the new self-identity of a nation state. Modernization of the "traditional" India was the major pre-occupation of the new elite.

The "field-view" of India was constructed through the use of "scientific method" and therefore offered a more authentic picture of Indian social reality than the one provided by the "book-view" of Indian society, constructed by the Indologists using the classical Hindu scriptures. The "book-view" was partial because it was constructed from the sources that were mostly produced by the Brahmins and thus reflected a biased, upper-caste, notion of the Indian civilization. Such a biased "view" of India obviously needed to be revised in post-independence democratic India!

I would like to argue in this paper that through the 'village-studies' sociologists and social anthropologists acquired a sense of relevance for themselves and for their disciplines by participating in the national project. Using, more or less, similar kinds of theoretical frameworks and methods of data collection, social anthropologists studied villages in different parts of the sub-continent and produced a picture that had many similarities in the way social life was organized in a "typical Indian village". I shall try to show that since in the village was reflected India in microcosm and the social structure of the villages was, more or less, similar everywhere, the village studies tried to establish the fact, intentionally or unintentionally, that the socio-cultural identity of India was an indisputable empirical fact. By underlining the "unity" of the village, social anthropologists of this genre also underscored the civilization unity of India. More explicitly, the 'village-studies' were to construct a picture of the "traditional India" on the basis of which the "new" Indian State and its planners were to work towards its development and modernization.

LOCATING VILLAGE STUDIES

While the Indian sociologists and social anthropologists saw themselves as undertaking an important task for the nation by carrying out empirical studies of the village social life, there were also other important developments in the global academy that made the village studies a popular theme of research during the 1950s.

The emergence of the "new states" following de-colonization during the post-War period had an important influence on research priorities in the social sciences. The most significant feature of the newly emerged 'Third World' countries was the dependence of large proportions of their populations on a stagnant agrarian sector. The struggle for freedom from colonial rule had also developed new aspirations among the 'masses' and the 'elite' of these societies. In some of these struggles, the peasants had played an important role. Thus, the primary agenda for the "new" political regimes was the transformation of their "backward" and stagnant economies. Though the strategies and priorities differed, 'modernization' and 'development' became common programmes in most of the Third World countries. It was in this historical context that 'development studies' emerged as one of the most important areas of academic interest in the global academy. Development studies were supposed to provide relevant data and prescriptive knowledges for socio-economic transformations. The Western powers also had a great deal of political interest in the "paths" of development being pursued by different developing countries in the Third World. Much of this concern emanated from their

anxiety about the possibility of these countries choosing a socialistic pattern of development and their consequent tilt towards the then existing "Soviet block".

Since a large majority of the populations in Third World countries were directly dependent on agriculture, understanding the prevailing structures of agrarian relations and working out ways and means of transforming them were recognized as being the most important priorities within development studies. Western political interests in the rural inhabitants of the Third World and the growing influence of modernization and development theories also brought with them a great deal of funding for the study of peasant economies and societies (Silverman 1987:11). It was in this context that the concept of 'peasantry' found currency in the discipline of social anthropology.

At a time when primitive tribes were either in the process of disappearing or had already disappeared, the "discovery" of the peasantry provided a new lease of life to the discipline of social anthropology (Beteille 1974b). Krober defined peasants as "part societies with part cultures"(Krober in Redfield, 1965:20). The peasantry was seen as a universal 'human type' having 'something generic about it, a kind of arrangement of humanity with some similarities all over the world'. They were attached to land through bonds of sentimentality and emotions. Agriculture, for them, was 'a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit' (Redfield, 1965:17-18; Shanin, 1987).

This notion of peasant society fitted well with the new evolutionist mode of thinking being made popular by 'modernization theory' around the same time. Peasantry, in this framework, invariably referred to what Europe had been before the industrial revolution and what the Third World still was. Thus the notion of traditional society conceptualized by the modernization theory as the opposite of 'modern society', resembled very closely the notion of 'peasantry' in the new discipline of 'peasant studies'.

The 'village community' was identified as the social foundation of the peasant economy in Asia (Breman, 1987:1). Beteille argues that this conceptual identity of village with peasant community 'is rooted in European ideology and European scholarship' (Beteille 1974b:47). It is rather easy to see the connection between the Redfieldian notion of 'peasant studies' and the Indian 'village studies'. Among the first works on the subject, *Village India: Studies in the Little Community* (edited by M. Marriot, 1955), was brought out under the direct supervision of Robert Redfield. He even wrote a preface to this book. His concept of 'little community' has also been quite popular among the social anthropologists in India.

Apart form these, there was also, what could be called, a received commonsense about the Indian society. From colonial bureaucracy to the nationalist freedom struggle, everybody had emphasized on the village being the essence of India. It was perhaps this historical context that made the sociologists and social anthropologists to treat the village as the obvious and natural entry point to the study of India.

HISTORY AND THE METHOD[1]

Having found a relevant subject matter in the village, the social anthropologists (many of whom were either from the West or were Indian scholars trained in the Western universities) initiated field studies in the early 1950s. A number of short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages were published by them in the newly launched Indian journal called *The Economic Weekly* (which later came to be known as *Economic and Political Weekly*) during October, 1951 and May 1954. These essays were put together by M.N. Srinivas in the form of a book with the title *India's Villages* in 1955. In the same year M. Marriot published another collection by the name of *Village India.* Interestingly, the first volume of *Rural Profiles* by D.N. Majumdar also appeared in 1955. All the three were edited volumes and many of the contributors were common. Srinivas, for example, had a paper in each of the three volumes. The first full-length study of a village near Hyderabad in the Telangana region, *Indian Village*, by S.C. Dube also appeared in the same year.

There was a virtual explosion of village studies in the sixties and seventies. 'Although social anthropologists were the first in the field which they dominated throughout, scholars from other disciplines – political science, history, economics, and so on – were also attracted to it' (Beteille, 1996:235). Though most of the studies provided a more general account of social, economic and cultural life of the rural people, some of the later studies also focused on specific aspects of the rural social structure, such as, stratification, kinship, or religion.

An anthropologist typically selected a single "middle" sized village where he/she carried-out an intensive field-work, generally by staying with the "community" for a fairly long period of time, ranging from one to two years, and at the end of the stay he/she was supposed to come out with a "holistic" account of the social and cultural life of the village people. The most important feature that qualified these studies to be called anthropological was the fieldwork component and the use of "participant-observation", a method of data collection that anthropologists in the West had developed while doing studies of tribal communities. The method of intensive fieldwork came to be seen as the defining characteristic of the discipline of social anthropology and there was a fairly standardized pattern that had to be followed by the practitioners.

> A typical piece of intensive fieldwork was one in which the worker lived for a year or more among a community of perhaps four or five hundred people and studied every detail of their life and culture; in which he came to know every member of the community personally; in which he was not content with generalised information, but studied every feature of life and custom in concrete detail and by means of the vernacular language (River in Beteille and Madan, 1975:2).

The rules and regularities of the native customs were not merely to be recorded by the ethnographer with camera, note book and pencil but more fruitfully observed by himself being a participant in the happenings around him. 'Intensive fieldwork experience was of critical importance in the career of an anthropologist. It formed the basis of his

comprehension of all other societies, including societies differing greatly from the one of which he had first-hand knowledge. No amount of book-knowledge was a substitute for field experience' (Srinivas, 1955a:88). The "participant-observation" method was seen as a method that 'understood social life from within, in terms of the values and meanings attributed to it by the people themselves' (Beteille, 1996:10).

Majumdar too contended that after the isolated tribal communities, the village came to be seen as the right kind of subject matter for anthropologists. The genuine field of study for the anthropologists, he argued, was the *Gemeinschaft*, the 'closed community' and it was 'in the context of 'evaporation' of tribal societies due to assimilation and (or) extinction, that they were compelled to turn their attention to the rural community which continues to retain the essential face-to-face *Gemeinschaft* character'. The anthropologist's love for rural studies was a natural extension of his/her interest in tribal studies. A typical anthropologist lived with the people he studied, established rapport with them, participated in their day to day life, spoke their language, and recorded his observations of the ways of life of the people (Majumdar,1956:138). Participant observation also provided continuity between the earlier tradition of anthropology when it studied the tribal communities and its later preoccupation with the village. As Beteille writes:

> In moving from tribal to village studies, social anthropologists retained one very important feature of their craft, the method of intensive fieldwork.... Those standards were first established by Malinowski and his pupils at the London School of Economics in the twenties, thirties and forties, and by the fifties, they had come to be adopted by professional anthropologists the world over (Beteille, 1996:233-4).

However, despite this continuity with the earlier tradition of anthropology, the historical context of the village studies was very different from the tribal studies.

PERCEIVED SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VILLAGE

Interestingly a good number of scholars who carried-out village studies have also written about their field experience and on what motivated them to undertake such studies.

The discovery of peasantry had rejuvenated the discipline of social anthropology. In the emerging intellectual and political environment during the post war period, anthropologists saw themselves as playing an important role in providing an authentic and scientific account of the "traditional social order", the transformation of which had become a global concern. Many of the village monographs emerged directly from the projects carried-out by sociologists and social anthropologists for development agencies. These included studies by Dube (1955), Majumdar (1958), and Lewis (1958). Lewis, who studied a Delhi village, for example, writes,

> Our work was problem oriented from the start. Among the problems we studied intensively were what the villagers felt they needed in housing, in education, in

health; land consolidation programme; and the newly created government-sponsored panchayats (Lewis, 1958:ix).

Lewis was appointed by the Ford Foundation in India to work with the Programme Evaluation Organization of the Planning Commission to help in developing a scheme for an objective evaluation of the rural reconstruction programme.

A typical anthropologist, unlike his/her economist counterpart, saw the village 'in the context of the cultural life lived by the people' and the way 'rural life was inter-locked and interdependent' which 'baffled social engineers as it could not be geared to planned economy. It was here that the economists needed the assistance of sociologists and anthropologists' (Majumdar, 1955:iv). Though they were intended to only assist the 'big brothers' economists in the planning process, the anthropologists saw their perspective as being "superior". 'He alone studied village community as a whole, and his knowledge and approach provided an indispensable background for the proper interpretation of data on any single aspect of rural life. His approach provided a much-needed corrective to the partial approach of the economist, political scientist and social worker, he tried to keep his value judgements to himself, and this gave him the necessary sympathy to grasp the rural or tribal situation' (Srinivas 1955b:90). The importance of the 'village- studies' lay in their ability to sensitize the planners to the felt needs of the people. In absence of a serious field work tradition in the social sciences, 'planners and government tended to treat people like dough in their hands. The fact that people had resources of their own, physical, intellectual and moral, and that they could use them to their advantage, was not recognised by those in power' (Srinivas, 1978:34). While economists used quantitative techniques and their method was "more scientific", the anthropological approach had its own advantages. Anthropological studies provided qualitative analysis. The method of anthropology required that its practitioners selected 'a small universe which could be studied intensively for a long period of time to analyse its intricate system of social relations' (Epstein, 1962:2).

However, not all of them were directly involved with development agencies. In fact most of them saw the relevance of their works more in professional terms. Taking a position against the close involvement of anthropologists with the development process, Srinivas argued that 'the anthropologist has intimate and first hand knowledge of one or two societies and he can place his understanding at the disposal of the planner. He may in some cases even be able to anticipate the kind of reception a particular administrative measure may have. But he can not lay down policy because it is a result of certain decisions about right and wrong. From the point of view of the growth of social anthropology concentration on merely useful or practical is not altogether healthy' (Srinivas, 1960:13 emphasis added). Maintaining a "safe" distance from the State and the development agencies was seen to be necessary because sociology and social anthropology, unlike the discipline of economics, did not have a theoretical grounding that could help them become applied sciences. The need for value-neutrality and objectivity emphasized so strongly by the classical founders of the two disciplines and the 'self-regulating' notion of society being central to the functionalist perspective

obviously discouraged sociologists and social anthropologists from being identified too closely with the State.

The relevance of studying the village was mostly seen in terms of it being a medium through which a scientific understanding of Indian society could be developed. 'Villages were close to people, their life, livelihood and culture' and they were 'a focal point of reference for individual prestige and identification'. As 'an important administrative and social unit, the village profoundly influenced the behaviour pattern of its inhabitants.' Villages were supposed to have been around for 'hundreds of years', having 'survived years of wars, making and breaking up of empires, famines, floods and other natural disasters'. They were the 'principle social and administrative unit' in the region. This perceived 'historical continuity and stability of villages' strengthened the case for village studies (Dasgupta 1978:1).

Though the village studies did not celebrate the peasant way of life, they did have a "subalternist" element in their perspective. It was not merely because of the method of participant-observation. The village studies were also seen as one way of contesting popular elitist notions about the rural people. It will be useful to quote Srinivas once again:

> The educated Indian elite commonly regards the peasant as ignorant, tradition-bound, and resistant to progress. His action and motivations appear anything but rational to the elite... and he lacks the sense to take advantage of the many benefits offered by a benevolent government working through a plethora of institutions and specialists.
>
> Rationality does not exist in a vacuum but in a cultural context, and human satisfactions are themselves frequently culturally determined. The elite are annoyed with the peasant for not making choices which they want him to make, but they seem to be ignorant of the fact that choices are linked to structural economic and cultural factors (Srinivas 1978:33).

While agreeing that the Indian peasants indeed were conservative, Srinivas offered a sympathetic explanation for their attitude towards change, one that only an anthropologist could appreciate:

> The anthropologist who has made an intensive study of a village community is unable to subscribe to the current views regarding the peasant. The conservatism of the peasant is not without reason. His agricultural techniques are a prized possession embodying as they do the experience of centuries. His social and cultural institutions give him a sense of security and permanence and he is naturally loath to change them ((Srinivas, 1955b:92-94).

Most importantly, the village for anthropologists was not just an area of specialized interest. Specializing on India meant studying 'village' or 'caste'. The village and its hamlets represented "India in microcosm" (Hoebel in Hiebert, 1971:vii). The two were

seen as the defining features of the Indian society. The people of India lived in villages and their social organization could be understood by referring to the structure and ideology of caste hierarchy. This is perhaps best articulated by Beteille in the introductory pages of his study of a Tamil Nadu village, as he wrote:

> ...it is possible to study within the framework of a single village many forms of social relations which are of general occurrence throughout the area. Such, for instance are the relations between Brahmins, non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas (Untouchables) and between landowners, tenants and agricultural labourers.
>
> These relations are governed by norms and values which have a certain generality... much can be learnt about the relationships between principle and practice by making detailed observations in a single village.
>
> The village...may be viewed as a point at which social, economic, and political forces operating over a much wider field meet and intersect (Beteille, 1996:1-2).

Srinivas too thought and argued in a similar vein. Villages, for an anthropologist, were

> invaluable *observation-centres* where he can study in detail social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India, if not in a great part of the world. An anthropologist goes to live in a village ... not because he wants to collect information about curious and dying customs and beliefs, but to study a theoretical sociological problem, and his most important aim is to contribute to the growing body of theoretical knowledge about the nature of human societies (Srinivas, 1955b:99 emphasis added).

It was seen to be particularly critical to carry-out village studies during the fifties and the sixties because that was the time when the Indian society was seen to be experiencing fundamental changes and the anthropologist needed to record details of a "traditional social order" before it was too late. Srinivas underscored this urgency when he wrote 'We have, at the most, another ten years in which to record facts about a type of society which is changing fundamentally and with great rapidity' (Srinivas, 1955b:99)

"UNITY" AND "DIVERSITY": GENERAL FEATURES OF THE VILLAGE

Unlike the tribal communities, the Indian villages had a considerable degree of diversity. This diversity was both internal as well as external. The village was internally differentiated in diverse groupings and had a complex structure of social relationships and institutional arrangements. There were also different kinds of villages in different parts of the country. Even within a particular region of the country, not all the villages were alike. By definition, peasants, unlike the tribal people, were not isolated communities. 'The peasants', Redfield argued, 'had firm relations with townsmen; not only economic, but also social and cultural'. It was this feature that distinguished 'the peasantry from its counterparts, the tribal communities. When Krober remarked that a peasant community was a half society and a half culture, he was referring to this fact. The community was completed by its other parts; the society and culture of gentry or townsmen. The priest, Brahmin, and city-bred elite carried into the village a superior

authority, explicit models of manners and conduct, and communicated to it something of the more reflective dimension of the civilized culture. Whether these representatives of the great tradition were present in the village as residents, or came to the village occasionally, or were encountered as the peasant went to the town, in one way or another, this cultural dependence on the outside and superior world characterized peasant society' (Redfield, 1956:63). This fact was repeatedly underlined by the anthropologists who carried out field studies of villages in different parts of India. The stereotypical image of the Indian village as a self-sufficient community, Beteille argues, has been contested by anthropological studies. As regards Sripuram, his study village, 'at least as far back in time as living memory went, there was no reason to believe that the village was fully self-sufficient in the economic sphere (Beteille, 1996:136-7). M. W. Smith wrote in his paper on the Punjab village:

> In terms of economic and social specialization, marital ties, and religious and political organization, the structural unit is larger than the village. These are not contacts in which the villager may indulge, they are imposed upon him by the habits of his existence..... Important as these village studies may be, therefore ... it does not seem to me that my complete picture of Punjab life can be obtained from them alone (Smith, 1960:178-179).

In his introduction to the celebrated collection, India's Villages, M. N. Srinivas too contested the colonial notion of the Indian village being a completely self-sufficient republic. This Srinivas argued, was a myth. The village 'was always a part of a wider entity. Only villages in pre-British India were less dependent economically on the town than villages are today' (Srinivas, 1960:10; also see, Srinivas and Beteille, 1964).

However, despite this contention about the village having links with the outside world and explicating the diversities that marked the rural society of India, it was the 'unity' of the village that was underlined by most anthropologists. The fact that the village interacted with the outside world did not mean it did not have a design of its own or could not be studied as a representative unit of the Indian social life. While villages had horizontal ties, it was the vertical ties within the village that governed much of the life of an average person in the village. Among those who stressed it the most were Dube and the Srinivas. Village was represented as providing an important source of identity to its residents. Different scholars placed different emphasis on how significant the village identity was when compared to other sources of identification, such as those of caste, class or locality. Srinivas argued that individuals in his village had a sense of identification with their village and an insult to one's village had to be avenged like an insult to oneself, one's wife, or one's family (Srinivas, 1976:270).

Similarly, while Dube recognized the obvious fact that 'Indian villages varied greatly in their internal structure and organization, in their ethos and world-view, and in their life-ways and thought-ways, on account of variety of factors', nevertheless he argued that:

> Village communities all over the Indian sub-continent have a number of common features. The village settlement, as a unit of social organization, represents a

> solidarity different from that of the kin, the caste, and the class....Each village is a distinct entity, has some individual mores and usages, and posses a corporate unity. Different castes and communities inhabiting the village are integrated in its economic, social, and ritual pattern by ties of mutual and reciprocal obligations sanctioned and sustained by generally accepted conventions. Inside the village, community life is characterised by economic, social, and ritual co-operation existing between different castes.... Notwithstanding the existence of groups and factions inside the settlement, people of the village can, and do, face the outside world as an organized, compact whole (Dube,1960:202).

In his monograph on the Telangana village also Dube constructed the village in co-operative and communitarian terms and underlined its interdependence and unity. He wrote:

> Within the village community there is an appreciable degree of inter-caste and inter-family co-operation.... (T)he social system enjoys co-operation between a number of castes in the field of economics and ritual. Several aspects of community life depend for their smooth running on the traditional system of mutual give and take. Apart from these conventional ties which are a constituent part of the social structure, several relationships involving voluntary co-operation can be observed (Dube, 1955:199).

Working in the same kind of a framework, Opter and Singh argued:

> Not only does everyone have some place within the Hindu system, but it is significant that every group, from Brahman to the Chamar caste, has been somehow integrated into the social and ceremonial order of the community and has been given some opportunity to feel indispensable and proud (Opter and Singh, 1948:496).

It was W. H. Wiser who much before the village-studies took off had, in his classic study of *'The Hindu Jajmani System'* (first published in 1936), had conceptualized the social relationships among caste groups in a north Indian village in the framework of 'reciprocity'. The framework of reciprocity implied that though village social organization was hierarchical, it was the 'interdependence' among different caste groups that characterized the underlying spirit of the Indian village. There were differences but the interdependence united the village community. 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. Wiser emphasized the equality of reciprocal exchange when he wrote:

> Each serves the other. Each in turn is master. Each in turn is servant (Wiser 1969:10).

Though the later studies were much more elaborate and contained long descriptions of different forms of social inequalities and differences in the rural society, many of them continued to use the framework of reciprocity particularly while conceptualizing 'unity'

of the village social life. Foremost amongst these were the writings of Srinivas. He is so much in agreement with Wiser's notion reciprocity as the characteristic feature of the village social structure that he went to the extent of generalizing it for the entire India. Regarding Wiser's study of Karimnagar as being the first proper anthropological work on an Indian village Srinivas writes:

> The method adopted by the Wisers in their study of Karimnagar was quite different from that of the economists. They spent years in the village, talked to the local inhabitants in Hindi, participated in their activities, and did their utmost to help the needy and alleviate the suffering of fellow villagers. The quality of information gathered by Wisers was superior to anything collected before, and when this was put in holistic framework,... *the result was a memorable picture not only of Karimnagar but of the village life in the sub-continent, microcosm reflecting the macrocosm* (Srinivas 1996: 181-2 emphasis added).

Even when Srinivas recognized the existence of "vertical ties" between 'landlord and tenants, between master and servants, and between creditor and debtor' (Srinivas, 1955a) as structural features of village social life, he did not see these relations as being necessarily conflictual or exploitative in nature. On the contrary, it was the interdependence of the caste groups resulting from such ties that defined the village. As he wrote:

> When caste is viewed as hierarchy, it is the distinctiveness of each group and its separateness and distance from the others that receive emphasis. But distinctiveness and distance go along with the interdependence of the different castes living in a village or group of neighbouring villages. The two are parts of a single system (Srinivas, 1976:185).

Srinivas's position is stated most explicitly in his response to Dumont and Pocock's critique of the village studies in their review of the two above mentioned volumes on Indian village published in 1955 which had been edited by Marriot and Srinivas. Dumont and Pocock in a review article in the than newly launched journal *'Contributions to Indian Sociology'* had contested the relevance of treating the village as a representative unit for understanding Indian society. Villages, they argued were not "communities" in the classical sense of the term because the caste system hierarchized the rural society of India. It was the idea of 'inequality' and not that of 'community' that characterized India. Further, they argued, that the caste ties went much beyond the village and therefore to explain the structure of Indian society, sociology of India should focus on the caste system and not on the village (Dumont and Pocock,1957; Pocock, 1960).

Arguing against Dumont, Srinivas insisted that unequal groups living in small face to face collectivities could have common interests binding them together and therefore they could qualify to be treated as 'communities'. It may be worthwhile quoting him at length on this.

> The tendency to stress intra-caste solidarity and to forget inter-caste complementarity is to ignore the social framework of agricultural production in

> pre-British India. Castewise division of labour forced different castes living in a local area to come together in the work of growing and harvesting crops. Landowners forged inter-caste ties not only with artisan and servicing castes but also with castes providing agricultural labour. These last mentioned ties involved daily and close contact between masters from the powerful dominant castes and servants from the Untouchable or other castes just above the polluting line. Again, in context of a non-monetized or minimally monetized economy, and very little spatial mobility, relationships between households tended to be enduring. *Enduringness itself was a value, and hereditary rights and duties acquired ethical overtones* (Srinivas, 1994:43 emphasis added).

Elsewhere he writes:

> ...it must be remembered that in pre-British India there was a general acceptance of caste, and of the idiom of caste in governing relationships between individuals and between groups. Given such a framework of acceptance of hierarchy, it ought not to be difficult to conceive of communities which are non-egalitarian, their people playing interdependent roles and all of them having a common interest in survival. (Srinivas 1987:57).

However not everyone emphasised the unity of the village the way Srinivas and Dube or earlier 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 instance, 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' (Hiebert, 1971:13). Similarly, Majumdar had pointed out that the assumption about village being an 'integrated whole, a way of living, thinking and feeling has its limitations in the Indian conditions'. Kinship ties integrated the village 'at different levels with the total social system of the country' (Majumdar, 1958:325). However the more important fact that divided the village was its settlement pattern.

> The caste-wards that we find in most of our villages, the 'purer' settlements which are inhabited by the higher castes, and the 'polluted' quarters owned by the lower and scheduled castes are so widely dissimilar that even within the village we may have little in common, in idea, beliefs and practices, in education, income and levels of living in the matter of inter-caste relations, life and living habits are different, and these are gaps which have remained so, in spite of centuries of joint living, and co-operation and competition within the village (*ibid*, 325-6)

However, unlike Dumont and Pocock, Majumdar did recognise the relevance of studying villages. 'In village was not merely a way of life, it was also a concept – it was a constellation of values and so long as our value system did not change or changed slowly and not abruptly, the village would retain its identity' (*ibid*, 329). He also underlined the fact that there were occasions when different sections of the village came together. This process was clearly illustrated in the religious life of the village 'in which there was a

perfect give-and-take and reciprocity of relationships'. And, he argued, that 'despite economic competition and continued exploitation of the lower by higher caste-groups, there existed common problems and common interests' (*ibid,* 326).

Andre Beteille too had argued that his study village 'Sripuram as a whole constituted a unit in a physical sense and, to a much lesser extent, in the social sense'(Beteille, 1996:39).

> the primary cleavages within this unit subdivide it into the three more or less well-defined communities of Brahamins, non-Brahmins, and Adi-Dravidas;...each of these subdivisions, particularly the first and the last, is a unit in a much more fundamental sense than the village as a whole (*ibid*, 39).

However, like Majumdar, Beteille too recognised that there were spheres of life where the village exhibited a semblance of unity, most importantly in the sphere of economy and religion.

> In the economic sphere the Brahmins of Sripuram...enter into relations with the non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas. A large number of them are landowners, dependent upon the services of non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas as tenants and agricultural labourers....(T)he ideology of caste itself forces Brahmins Mirsadars to enter into economic relations with Non-Brahmins by forbidding to them the use of the plough.
>
> ...A complex set of ties thus binds together the Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, and Adi-Dravidas of the village in a web of economic interdependence (*ibid*:100).

He further argued:

> The productive process, by bringing into existence social relations between different classes of people, gives a kind of vertical unity to the village, making landowners, tenants, and agricultural labourers dependent upon one another. People having a diversity of backgrounds and interests are brought into relationship with each other by virtue of their complementary roles in the system of production (*ibid*: 128-9).

However though the process of production created vertical ties among different social groups, this did not necessarily imply a unity of the village as 'these relations of production easily overflowed the boundary of the village. About half of the landowners of Sripuram lived outside the village' (*ibid*: 129).

Answers to the question of unity and the relevant unit of social organization also depended on what was being discussed. A. C. Mayer, who focused on kinship in a central Indian village, argued that 'the social universe of the people of his village, Ramkheri, comprised a region of a few hundred villages' (Mayer,1960: 270). However, for him village as a concept was also critical and he insisted that 'it would be a mistake to think of the village as a mere collection of separate caste groups. For many of the people's interests centred inside the village and provided village-wide participation in some

events. And differences of custom and caste composition in other villages added to a feeling of separateness which quickly turned into *village patriotism'* (*ibid*:132 emphasis in original).

Among those anthropologists who nearly rejected the idea of the communitarian unity of the Indian village were Lewis and Bailey. Comparing Indian "village community" with the American neighbourhood, Lewis argued:

> ...in Rampura...the community in the sense of a cohesive and united village community or in the sense of the American neighbourhood, village ... hardly exists. Caste and kinship still form the core of village social orgainization and this splits the village into separate communities which have their close affiliations across village lines...(Lewis, 1958:148-9).
>
> ... caste system divides the village and weakens the sense of village solidarity. The castes generally represents a distinct ethnic group with its own history, tradition, and identification, and each caste lives in more or less separate quarters of the village...each caste forms a separate little community (*ibid* :314).

Even the so called 'village common land' was not the common property of everyone. Far from working as a 'source of village unity, it had often been a source of dissension'. Rights to use the common lands were confined to the landowning dominant castes and were 'based upon the amount of private land each Jat held' (*ibid*:94).

However, it was F.G. Bailey who provided a radical critique of the 'unity-reciprocity' thesis and offered an alternative perspective. Stressing on the coercive aspects of caste relations, he writes:

> ... those who find the caste system to their taste have exaggerated the harmony with which the system works, by stressing the degree of interdependence between the different castes. Interdependence means that everyone depends on everyone else: it means reciprocity. From this it is easy to slip into ideas of equality: because men are equally dependent on one another, they are assumed to be equal in other ways. Equality of rank is so manifestly false when applied to a caste system that the final step in the argument is seldom taken, and exposition rests upon a representation of mutual interdependence, and the hint that, because one caste could bring the system to a standstill by refusing to play its part, castes do not in fact use this sanction to maintain their rights against the rest. In fact, of course, the system is held together not so much by ties of reciprocity, but by the concentration in one of its parts. The system works the way it does because the coercive sanctions are all in the hands of a dominant caste. There is a tie of reciprocity, but it is not a sanction of which the dependent castes can make easy use (Bailey, 1960:258).

However, this kind of a perspective did not become popular among the anthropologists doing village studies. It was the agrarian studies that later took up these issues. The 'village studies' largely continued with the 'unity-reciprocity' thesis though different

studies varied in their emphasis on 'interdependence' and harmony characterising these relationships.

FIELD-VIEW' AND THE FIELD-WORK

More than anything else, it was the method of participant observation that distinguished the village studies and the anthropological constructions of the rural social life from the rural surveys being conducted by economists and demographers. And it was this method of qualitative field-work that helped social anthropology gain a measure of respectability in the Indian academy. As Beteille and Madan write in their celebrated edited volume on field work, *Encounter and Experience: Personal Accounts of Fieldwork*, "Fieldwork, more than anything else perhaps, is what today characterizes social anthropology as a mode of inquiry into society and culture.... The sociology of India would not be what it is today but for the insights fed into it by intensive fieldwork" (Beteille and Madan, 1975:1). As mentioned above, the 'field-view' of the village was a superior way (when compared to the "book-view) of understanding contemporary Indian society because the anthropologist used a "scientific method" of inquiry and provided a "holistic" picture of the village social life.

However, despite this 'self-image' of a scientist and a repeated emphasis on "value-neutrality" towards the subjects being studied, a close reading of what these students of Indian village have written about their experiences in their village during field work provides a completely different picture. Apart from pointing to the kinds of problems they faced in getting information about the village social life, they give vivid descriptions of how their own location and social background influenced their observations of the village society and conditioned their access to different sections of the villagers. The place they chose to live in the village during the field work, the friends they made for regular information, the social class they themselves came from, their gender, the caste status bestowed upon them by the village, all played important roles in the kind of data they could access.

The manner in which an individual anthropologist negotiated his/her relationship with the village determined who was going to be his/her informant. One of the first questions asked of a visitor was regarding his/her caste. Accordingly the village placed the visitor in its own structure and allocated him/her a place and status. The anthropologist was not only expected to respect this allocation of status bestowed on him/her by the village, he was also asked to conform to the normative patterns of the caste society. The anthropologist had to come to terms with the village social structure because the method of participant observation required that he/she went and stayed in the village personally for a fairly long period of time. The easiest way of developing rapport with the village was through the village leaders or the head of the panchayat who invariably came from the dominant upper caste. Most of the anthropologists themselves being from upper or middle class background, it was easier for them to approach these leaders. This also helped them execute their studies with lesser difficulties. Majumdar is explicit about this:

> The ex-zamindar family provided accommodation and occasionally acted as the host, and this contact helped ... to work with understanding and confidence; little effort was needed to establish *rapport* (Majumdar, 1958:5).

Moreover, in an Indian village during the fifties and sixties, only the richer upper caste landowners could have provided accommodation to the visiting anthropologist. The low caste rural poor rarely had enough housing even for their own requirements. However, finding a place to live was not merely a matter of convenience. It identified the investigator with certain groups in the village and this identification had its advantages as well as disadvantages. While it gave them access to the life ways of the upper castes, it also made them suspect in the eyes of the lower castes. Recognizing the significance of this, Shah, who did a study of 'the household dimensions of family' in rural Gujarat, , writes:

> ...the village headman arranged a house for our stay during our first visit to the village. We could not exercise our choice in this matter. When we had to vacate this house and find another, again we could not exercise our choice. The latter house was also located in the same ward as did the former .... This ward was populated mostly by three upper castes, Brahmins, Rajputs and Patidars, and most of the village leaders, including the headman, lived there. Our living in this ward gave us certain advantages as well as disadvantages. The main advantage was that we could observe the village leaders more closely.... The main disadvantage was that we could not observe as closely the untouchables (Shah, 1979:35).

Others also had similar experiences. The Tamil village that Beteille studied was divided into three clearly demarcated residential areas on the basis of caste. He was "permitted" to live in a Brahmin house in the *agraharam* (the Brahmin locality), 'a privilege', he was told, 'never extended to an outsider and a non-Brahmin before'. However, his acceptance in the *agraharam* as a co-resident was on certain implicit conditions.

> I could live in the *agraharam* only on certain terms, by accepting some of the duties and obligations of a member of the community.... The villagers of Sripuram had also assigned me a role, and they would consider it most unnatural if I decided suddenly to act in ways that were quite contrary to what was expected (Beteille, 1975:104).

This, Beteille himself recognized, had serious implications for his fieldwork. The residents of the *agraharam* had their own perspectives on the village. For them, Sripuram was primarily their own locality. His village had over three hundred houses, while those who lived in the *agraharam* counted only about a hundred. For them the village meant only the *agraharam*. This process of exclusion operated not merely in the counting of heads, but also in other, more subtle, ways 'which often go unnoticed by the fieldworker who stayed only for a short while in the village' (Beteille, 1996:277).

Living in the *agraharam* also gave him an identity of a Brahmin in the village. "I was identified with Brahmins by my dress, my appearance, and the fact that I lived in one of their houses"(*ibid*:9). For the Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas, he was just another

Brahmin from North India. This meant that his "access to these groups was therefore, far more limited than to the Brahmins"(*ibid*:9). His visits to the Harijan locality received loud disapproval from his Brahmin hosts and he was also suspected by the Harijans. To put it in his own words:

> My first visit to the Harijan *cheri* taught me that such a visit was not only frowned upon by the Brahmins but also viewed by the Harijans with suspicion. I went there in the company of a Brahmin, and until the end most Harijans had no way of knowing that I myself could be anything but a Brahmin. The Harijans regard a visit to their homes by a Brahmin as unnatural, and some believe that it brings then ill luck (*ibid*:278).

The village was not only caste conscious, it was also class and gender conscious. To quote Beteille again:

> If I asked the tenant questions about tenancy in the presence of the landlord, he did not always feel free to speak frankly. If I arranged to meet the tenant separately to ask these questions, the landlord felt suspicious and displeased.... It was only by facing such problems in practical terms that the fieldworker learn what each party has at stake in these common arrangements (*ibid*:284).

Underlining the role gender played in "fieldwork", Leela Dube, one of the few Indian women anthropologists who worked in a village writes, "I was a Brahmin and a woman, and this the village people could never forget" (Dube, 1975:165).

Srinivas tells a similar story about his experiences in the field. Since his family originally came from the region where he did his field study, it was easier for his villagers to place him. For the villagers he 'was primarily a Brahmin whose joint family owned land in a neighbouring village' (Srinivas, 1976:33). The older villagers gave him the role of a Brahmin and a landowner. By so doing they were able to make him behave towards them in certain predictable ways, and they in turn were able to regulate their behaviour towards him.

As a "successful" participant observer, he could get himself accepted in the village to such an extent that on social occasions almost everyone in the village treated him as a Brahmin. He tells us, "However poor the host, I was given a green coconut and a cash-gift (*dakshina*) of eight *annas* or a rupee" (*ibid*:35). He also paricipated as a "learned Brahmin" whenever the village had its *puja* (the ritual cermonies). Almost all his friends in the village were from the dominant social groups.

More significant here perhaps is the fact that he very consciously confirmed to the normative patterns and the local values as he came to understand them.

> It did not *even occur to me* to do anything which might get me into trouble with the village establishment. I accepted the limitations and tried to work within them (*ibid*:47 emphasis added).

A similar kind of anxiety is expressed by Leela Dube when she writes:

> if I had to gain a measure of acceptance in the community, I must follow the norms of behaviour which the people associated with my sex, age, and caste (Dube,1975:165).

This conformist attitude towards the village social structure and its normative patterns as received through the dominant sections had such an important effect on their fieldwork that some of them quite consciously chose not to spend much time with the "low" caste groups. Srinivas, for example, admits that while he was collecting genealogies and a household census, he 'deliberately excluded the Harijan ward'. He thought that he 'should approach the Harijans only through the headman'. The consequence was that his account of the village was biased in favour of the upper caste Hindus. This was so obvious a fact that he himself recognizes this as a shortcoming of his study.

> My shortcomings as a field-worker are brought home to me poignantly when I contemplate the Harijans and Muslims. I realise only too clearly that mine was a high caste view of village society. I stayed in a high caste area, and my friends and companions were all Peasants or Lingayats (Srinivas, 1976:197-8).

It was not merely the "insider" Indian scholars who, while doing "participant observation", had to negotiate with the social structure of the village. The scholars from the West too had to come to terms with the statuses that the village gave them and caste group they came to be identified with. The British scholar, Adrian Mayer, who studied a village in central India writes:

> I was caught up in the village's caste situation, ...It was impossible for me merely to "observe" the caste system. I had to participate in it, by the fact of my living in Ramkheri.
>
> ....I could not avoid being "placed" in the commensal hierarchy, with all the implications that this entailed.... the village stated that I should be regarded as a person of undesignated upper caste status and that my links with Harijans should be consistent with this. And this is what they turned out to be. The Harijans never asked me for a meal from one of their hearths (Mayer, 1975:30-31).

By the time he left the village, he was most closely identified with Rajputs, the locally dominant caste.

NATION AND THE VILLAGE

In much of the writings, either by the social anthropologists themselves, who carried out the village studies, (as shown in the previous section) or by those who have critically commented on these studies[2], the dominant tendency has been to attribute the weaknesses of the village-studies mostly to the limitations of their methods or the theoretical perspectives. The admission to the upper caste bias in their picture of the village social, in most cases, was a post-facto "confession" by the social anthropologists rather than a limitation stated in the preface of the book. The implicit suggestion being that had they been careful enough and aware of these problems beforehand, they could have followed a different fieldwork strategy and the bias could have been corrected!

Similarly, there seems to have been little anxiety about the historical and geographical limitations of the categories like caste, tribe, village, jajmani relations, tradition or civilization. Not only was the village treated as a natural entry point to the study of India, its Indianness was also taken for granted. There were villages in India everywhere and they were all, more or less, alike. From Kerala to Punjab and even Himalayas, from Rajasthan to Bengal and Orissa, the village life had many similarities. (The collection of small essays edited Srinivas in 1955 had studies from different parts of India – Punjab, Himalayas, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, Mysore, Kerala, U.P., Rajasthan, Deccan , Orissa and Bengal).

The point that I wish to make here that apart from the strengths and weaknesses of the village studies in terms their relevance for understanding the rural social structure, one also needs to locate them historically. Intentionally or unintentionally, the social anthropological enterprise, particularly through the village-studies, was actively participating in the national project by affirming the structural unity of India.

"India", for social anthropologists of this genre, was not the India of 1950s and 1960s. Theirs was a search for the traditional India, an India that had been around since ages. The very naming of the project as the "field-view" of India that was to replace the "book-view", assumed that parallels could be drawn between the India constructed from the classical Hindu texts and that which was being constructed by the social anthropologists through their field observation. The "field-view" was superior not because the "book-view" was ancient and therefore no more relevant, but because the classical Indian (not "Hindu"!) texts were mostly written by the upper caste Brahmins.

Similarly, when the social anthropologists questioned the assumptions of the colonial ethnographers that Indian village was isolated, they did not invoke a historical method of explanation. The integration of village in the regional economy was not a historical fact that could be attributed to the colonial policies of administration. The village, i.e. the traditional Indian village, was "never" isolated[3]. The functionalist theoretical framework saw the process of social change in dichotomous universal evolutionary patterns. The societies changed from traditional to modern.

However, despite such a universal frame of reference, the Indianness of the Indian village was also an important fact. The Indian village had to be different if India's claim of being a distinct nation had to be ascertained. The Indian village communities were different from the European peasant communities. The distinctive character of India, above anything else, lay in the caste system. The caste was a feature of the entire sub-continent. The core social institution that 'village-studies' looked at was the caste. Not only could caste be found in the entire sub-continent, also everyone practiced it – Hindus, Muslims, Christian or Sikhs – none could escape from this essentially Indian practice.

However, caste was not something that we needed to be ashamed of. Untouchability was rarely seen as the defining feature of caste. Caste, as mentioned above, was not looked at in the framework of power and domination. If the villages were to qualify to be communities, caste could only be seen in the framework of reciprocity, a framework that also confirmed the unity of India as a people.

There are interesting similarities in the ways caste and rurality were constructed in the nationalist discourses and the manners in which social anthropologist conceptualized the two. One can identify three distinct notions of rurality in the nationalist discourse attributable to the three leaders of the freedom struggle, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. Gandhi saw the village community as a site of authenticity, the recovery of which was a pre-condition for a true swaraj. Nehru, and the left-wing of the nationalist movement looked at the village and it social organizations, particularly the institution of caste, in terms of backwardness. The modernization of India was to transform the village and its social organization into an open system of stratification (see Chatterjee 1995: 173-175). There was also a third but less influential stream in the nationalist thought that was represented by Ambedkar. Village, for Ambedkar, was a site of oppression. There was no escape from caste oppression in the village.

While one can see the elements of Gandhian village in the notion of village community in the village studies and similarly that of backwardness in the notion of traditionality as a characteristic feature of the Indian village, there is virtually no reference to the idea of village as being a site of oppression in the 'village studies'. It was only in the 1970s, and more importantly in the 1980s, that caste began to be looked at from a dalitist perspective. This was also the time when the nation began to get redefined by the powerful "new social movements" that became increasing visible during the 1980s.

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NOTES

[1] This and the following section are based on a earlier paper of mine (see Jodhka 1998).

[2] see, for example, Dumont and Pocock 1957; Pocock 1960; Inden, 1990; Breman 1997; Patel 1998; *Cotributions to Indian Sociology* (new series). Volume 12 (1) (special issue on M.N. Srinivas's *Remembered Village*).

[3] Cohn has interestingly argued that the colonial construction of the Indian village communities as being 'isolated' and independent from the centralised authority had helped the British rulers to legitimize the colonization of the sub-continent. Since the village, the basic unit of the Indian society, was anyway unchanging, isolated and an autonomous social reality, it did not really matter who actually ruled India. The Hindus, the Mughals, or the Sikhs were mere rulers and the British could legitimately replace them without touching the order of the "village republics". The indigenous rulers had no specific claims over their British counterparts to rule India. Rulers, natives or outsiders, anyway had very little in common with the life styles of the "village communities" (Cohn 1990 200-23).

Viewed in this context, the questioning of he autonomy of the village thesis by the social anthropological village studies also implied that India had a legitimate and historical right to be recognized a nation state, a cultural community with a long and shared history of its people.