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From "Book-view" to "Field-view": Social Anthropological Constructions of the Indian Village

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The Indian village has often been seen as the ultimate signifier of "authentic native life", a place where one could see or observe the "real" India and develop an understanding of the way local people organised their social life.

Though it was during the colonial period that the Indian society was first essentialised as a land of 'village republics', the later traditions of scholarship too have continued to treat village as the basic unit of the Indian society.

This paper attempts a critical examination of the social anthropological studies of the Indian village that were carried out during the 1950s and 1960s. It focuses on the way village social life was constructed in these monographs and in what ways these constructions of the Indian village differed from and continued with the earlier constructions in the colonial ethnography.

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Introduction

The idea of the village has occupied an important place in the history of contemporary India. It has been one of the core categories through which India has been imagined and imaged in modern times. The village has often been seen as an ultimate signifier of "authentic native life", a place where one could see or observe the "real" India and develop an understanding of the way local people organise their social relationships and belief systems. India above all was 'a land of villages' and it was in the village that 'the pulse of India' could be felt. As Beteille has pointed out, `the village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation' (Beteille,1980:108). The institutional patterns of the village society and its cultural values were supposed to be an example of what the western social theory described as the "traditional society". And therefore, the primary object of social and economic transformation had to be the village if the process of modernisation or development was to make headway and touch the common Indian.

It was during the British colonial rule that India was first essentialised as a land of 'village republics'. However, even in the post-independence period the village has continued to be treated as the basic unit of Indian society. Among the academic traditions, the study of village has perhaps been the most popular among the social anthropologists working on India. A large number of village studies were carried out by social anthropologists in different parts of India during the decades of 1950s and 1960s. The publication of these studies also marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Indian social sciences. They showed, for the first time, the relevance of a field-work based understanding of Indian society, or what came

to be known as the "field-view", an approach that was to replace, or at least contest, the then dominant "book-view" of Indian society developed by Indologists from classical Hindu scriptures as well as those provided by colonial ethnography.

While a considerable amount of work has been done by historians and other social scientists on the way colonial ethnographers constructed Indian village life and the various implications that these colonial representations had for Indian society, social anthropological constructions of the Indian village have not so far been examined critically and in much detail. This paper is an attempt to look at these anthropological constructions of the Indian village by (i) locating the context in which studying the village became a preoccupation with social anthropologists in India; (ii) the general terms in which the social life of the village was studied with a specific focus on the manner in which social differences and inequalities of caste, class and gender were constructed; (iii) the conclusions that were drawn from empirical findings regarding the general features of the village social life and the terms in which 'rurality' was constructed. (iv) And finally, since the most distinctive feature of these studies was their method of data collection, it would be useful to critically examine the assumptions with which the social anthropologists went to do their field-work; the way their own social contexts and their reception among different sections of the village society influenced field-work and the process of data collection[1] .

Colonialism and the Indian Village

One may find detailed references to village life in pre-colonial Indian history, but it was during the British colonial rule that for the first time colonial ethnography constructed an image of

the Indian village that was to have far reaching implications -- ideological as well as political. Along with the earlier writings of James Mill, Charles Metcalfe's notion of the Indian village community set the tone for much of the later writings on rural India. 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.' (as in Cohn, 1987:213).

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 civilisation. As Inden has pointed out, `though colonial administrators thought of the village as the atom of all the eastern nations and empires, it was only the `Indian village' that came to be viewed as the quintessential Asian village' (Inden, 1990:131) and it was the Indian civilisation that was essentialized in the idea of `village community'. China, for example, became known for its complex State structure and bureaucracy. Similarly, the middle-east was a civilisation of `sedentary towns' and nomadic pastoralists. It was India whose essence was to be found in the village. `Villages were not overlapping agents interacting with and reshaping one another. Each village was an inner world, a traditional community, self-sufficient in its economy, patriarchal in its governance, surrounded by an outer one of other hostile villages and despotic governments.' (Inden,

1990:133). When Marx and Engels wrote in *The New York Daily Tribune* on the possible effects of British rule on "stagnant India", they too viewed the Indian village in similar terms. It was in this context that they thought that British rule could create conditions for a social revolution in India.

The ethnographic literature generated by the colonial administrators also became a source material for a good number of Western social scientists who were trying to develop theories of society and history in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. It was not just Sir Henry Maine and Karl Marx who used this literature in their theories; even in the later evolutionist and functionalist theories of social change or in the dichotomous frameworks of traditional and modern societies in modernisation theory, the social organisation of the Indian village was referred to as a classic example of a pre-modern/traditional society.

Breman points out that the four core components that characterised the Asian village in the colonial discourse were: political autonomy, economic autarchy, social homogeneity and tenacious immutability of the closed collectivity (Breman, 1987). This construction of the village, in a way, was seen to be useful in rationalising the colonial dominance. It helped the colonial rulers develop social and political theories about the `realities of India' (Cohn,1987:212) that made it easier for them to legitimise the colonisation of India. 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".

This construction of India proved to be useful to the colonial empire in yet another way. The idea of 'village community' and 'caste', being the essential elements of Indian civilisation fitted well in the broader project of the 'orientalist theory'. As Edward Said has pointed out, the orientalist project 'generated authoritative and essentialising statements about the East and was characterised by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge' (Said, 1979). India was to provide material and became the object of knowledge for constructing an 'other', the dialectical opposite of the European self (Prakash, 1990; Inden,1990). This 'othering' of India required that the Indian village and its social organisation had nothing in common with "modern" Europe. While Europe was modern, urban, secular, individualistic and rational, the Indian village, by definition, did not possess any of these features. It may be useful to quote Inden once again:

> the absence of free market, of individuals, of private property, and of a competitive spirit said to characterise the Indian village were not simply empirical findings for the nineteenth century theorists; their absence was essential to the type of society itself. Those missing elements were tied together and constituted the essence of modern society (Inden, 1990:144).

Despite the obvious diversities present in its ecology, economy and society, India was made to appear as essentially having the same structure everywhere. For example the idea of the Hindu Jajmani System (as described by Wiser in 1936) or the notion of Varna hierarchy were

almost universally believed to apply to the entire Indian civilisation even when there was very limited historical and anthropological evidence available to confirm it[2] . In fact, even when there was any evidence that contradicted the dominant construct of the Indian village, it was conveniently ignored. The colonial surveys had revealed, for example, that the idea of the village panchayat was a myth and that what the villages had were caste panchayats, generally of the dominant caste[3] . This, however, had little or no effect on the dominant idea of India being the land of 'village republics'.

In many ways, even in the nationalist discourse, the idea of village as a representative of authentic native life was derived from the same kind of imagination. Though Gandhi was careful enough not to glorify the decaying village of British India, he nevertheless celebrated the so-called simplicity and authenticity of village life, an image largely derived from colonial representations of the Indian village. The decadence of the village was seen as a result of colonial rule and therefore village reconstruction was, along with political independence, an important process for recovery of the lost self.

"Village Studies" by Social Anthropologists

After the colonial administrators/ethnographers, it was the "young" discipline of social anthropology that took up the study of the Indian village during 1950s and 1960s in a big way. This marked the beginning of a new and important phase in the study of the Indian village. Village studies played a crucial role in institutionalising the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology in India. It was during this period that the two disciplines found a place for themselves in the Indian university system[4]. Generally basing their accounts on first-

hand field-work carried out in a single village, social anthropologists focused on the structures of social relationships, institutional patterns, beliefs and value systems of the rural people. A large number of monographs were produced during these two decades. 'So popular was this area of research that researchers came to be identified with the village they studied. Srinivas's Rampura, Dube's Shamirpet, Andre Beteille's Sripuram, or Ishvaran's Shivapur became legendary pairs of names' (Dhanagare, 1993: 54-55).

The village studies had an added significance for they had been carried-out at a time in Indian history when post-independence India was trying to develop a new self-identity as a nation state. Being extremely rich in the empirical details that they provide of the way social life was organised in rural India during the early years of independence, they can serve as useful source material for a history of contemporary Indian society.

A distinction is often made between "village studies" and "agrarian studies". The distinction is important for the discussion of the Indian village presented in this paper which is largely confined to an examination of the "village studies" alone and only occasionally refers to the latter. The students of Indian rural society generally distinguish the two traditions on the following grounds: (a) village studies and agrarian studies are two distinct phases in the social scientific writings on rural life in India. While most of the 'village studies' were conducted during 1950s and 1960s, 'agrarian studies' gained popularity in India during the early 1970s; (b) the two traditions of studying Indian rural society dealt with different sets of questions. While social anthropologists studied a single village focusing primarily on the social and cultural life of rural people and the manner in which rural society reproduced its 'moral order', the agrarian studies invariably began with inquiring into the status of land economy

in a broader framework of understanding change, or lack of it, in the sphere of production relations, distribution, marketing of agricultural surplus, and the rural power structure. Though many of those working on agrarian process studied villages, the village was always seen in a broader regional context (Breman,1989); and (c) perhaps most importantly, the two traditions have had very different theoretical orientations. Village studies, at least in the beginning, were the local incarnation of the functionalist anthropological tradition of 'peasant studies' initiated by Robert Redfield. It viewed the Indian village in a universalistic perspective and looked at the process of change in a dichotomous framework of traditional-modern societies. Agrarian studies were however closer to the tradition of 'political economy'. Though field-work continued to be an important source of data collection, agrarian studies were 'contextualised in a historical framework' (Breman, 1993:34; 1996).

Locating Village Studies

As mentioned above, the village studies undertaken by social anthropologists during 1950s and 1960s in India were an offshoot of the newly emerged interest in the study of the peasantry in the Western academy. The emergence of the "new states" following decolonisation 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 'elites' of these societies. In some of these struggles, the peasantry had played a crucial 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, 'modernisation' 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 recognised as being the most important priorities within development studies. Western political interest in the rural inhabitants of the Third World and the growing influence of modernisation 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'. Peasants were believed to be attached to the land through the bonds of sentiments 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 'modernisation 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 conceptualised by the modernisation theory as the opposite of 'modern society', resembled very closely the notion of 'peasantry' in the new discipline of the '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 quite easy to see this connection between the Redfieldian notion of 'peasant studies' and the Indian 'village studies'. The single most popular concept used by the anthropologists studying the Indian village was the Redfieldian notion of the 'little community'. 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.

History and the Method

Having found a relevant subject matter in the village, 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[5] . A number of short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages were published by these anthropologists 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 field-work came to be seen as the defining characteristic of the discipline of social anthropology and there was a fairly standardised pattern that had to be followed by the practitioners. 'A typical piece of intensive field-work 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 field-work 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, 1955:88). 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'. Thus, Majumdar argued, 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 a 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 field work.... 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).

Interestingly a good number of scholars who carried-out field-studies have also written about their experiences while doing these field-studies. I shall return to these later in the concluding section of the paper.

Perceived Significance of the Village

The discovery of peasantry thus 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 Organisation of the Planning Commission to help in developing a scheme for the 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 anthropologist's perspective was "superior" because '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). Village studies were to sensitise 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 programmes. 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 emphasised 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 project of change[6] .

The relevance of studying the village was seen more 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).

A field-work based understanding of India was not only to contest the book view propounded by the Indologists, the field studies were also supposed to throw up new questions for

professional historians and could be the source of a different and more meaningful understanding of the past. As Srinivas wrote:

> Historians have stated that a knowledge of the past is helpful in the understanding of the present if not in forecasting the future. It is not, however, realised that a thorough understanding of the present frequently sheds light on the past....(T)he intimate knowledge which results from the intensive field-survey of extant social institutions does enable us to interpret better, data about past social institutions. Historical data are neither as accurate nor as rich and detailed as the data collected by field-anthropolo-gists, and the study of certain existing processes increase our understanding of similar processes in the past (Srinivas, 1955b:99).

Though the village studies did not celebrate the peasant way of life, they did have a "subalternist" element in their perspective. It was not just 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 regard 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 which 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 perhaps the village for anthropologists was not just an area of specialised

interest. Specialising 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

organisation 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 tribals, 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 it 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 civilised 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 characterised 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 this 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, Dube recognising the obvious fact that 'Indian villages varied greatly in their internal structure and organisation, in their ethos and world-view, and in their life-ways and thought-ways, on account of variety of factors', nevertheless 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.... Notwith-standing 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 Smith 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.W. Wiser who had initially, in his classic study of *'The Hindu Jajmani System'*, first published in 1936, had conceptualised the social relationships among caste groups in 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 characterised 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 emphasised 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 conceptualising 'unity' of the village social life. Foremost amongst these were the writings of Srinivas. Even when he recognised the existence of "vertical ties" between 'landlord and tenants, between master and servants, and between creditor and debtor' (Srinivas, 1955) as characteristic features of village social organisation, 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 other 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 hierarchised the rural society of India. It was the idea of 'inequality' and not that of 'community' that characterised 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).

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 recognising 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 even emphasised that there were occasions when different sections of the village did come 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 (ibid:100).

...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).

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 organisation 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.

Social Structure of the Village: Caste, Class and Gender

The intellectual and historical contexts in which social anthropologists began their works on the village largely guided the kinds of research questions they identified for their studies. The tradition of studying tribal communities that emphasised a 'holistic' perspective also had its influence on the way village was visualised. Though anthropological methods of participant observation and their frameworks had evolved out of their experiences with the relatively egalitarian tribal communities, the empiricist approach that emphasised documenting almost everything relevant that they could observe during their field studies also meant giving due place to prevailing realities in the field. Thus, despite their preoccupation with kinship, religion and ritual life of the 'little communities', documenting their internal structures and village social life could not be completed without looking at the prevailing social differences. Theoretically also the emphasis on 'unity' did not mean absence of differences and social inequality. Neither did it mean that these questions were not important for social anthropology. Though not all of them began their work with a direct focus on understanding the structures of inequalities[7] , almost all scholars offered detailed descriptions of the prevailing differences of caste, class and gender in the village social life. Being rich in empirical description, one can construct a picture of the social relations which may not necessarily fit within the framework with which these studies were actually carried out.

The Caste System

Caste and hierarchy have long been seen as the distinctive and defining features of the Indian society. It was during the colonial period that caste was, for the first time, theorised in the modern sociological language. The colonial administrators also gathered extensive ethnographic details and wrote detailed accounts of the way systems of caste distinctions and hierarchies worked in different parts of the sub-continent. Social anthropology in the post-independence India continued with a similar approach that saw caste as the most important and distinctive feature of Indian society. While caste was a concrete structure that guided social relationships in the Indian village, hierarchy was its ideology. Hierarchy was made to appear as the single most important idea in the Indian culture that pervaded almost every aspect of village life[8].

An individual in the caste society lived in a hierarchical world. It was not only the people who were divided into higher or lower groups, but also the food they ate, the dresses and ornaments they wore, the customs and manners they practised were all ranked in an order of hierarchy. In the formal sense, the traditional *varna* system divided the Hindu society into five major categories. The first three, viz., Brahmins (the priests or men of learning), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) and Vaishyas (traders) were regarded as *dvijas* or the twice born. The fourth category was that of Shudras, composed of numerous occupational castes who were regarded as relatively 'clean' and were not classed as "untouchables". In the fifth major category were placed all the "untouchable" castes. This classification, Dube argued, was accepted by Hindus all over India. The legitimate occupations to be followed by people in these major categories (*varnas*) were defined by tradition. Within each category there were

several sub-groups (*jati* or castes), which could be arranged in a hierarchical order within themselves. In this general framework of the *varna* system, with considerable variations in different regions there were several socially autonomous castes, each fitting into one of the five major divisions but otherwise practically independent in their socio-religious sphere of life (Dube,1955:35-36). Though the essence of caste lay in 'the arrangement of hereditary groups in a hierarchy', the popular impression derived from the idea of *varn*a that arranged groups in an order with Brahmins at the top and Harijans at the bottom was right only partly. The empirical studies pointed out that 'in fact only the two opposite ends of the hierarchy were relatively fixed; in between, and especially in the middle region, there was considerable room for debate regarding mutual position' (Srinivas, 1980:5).

Caste divisions were seen to 'determine and decide all social relations'. Though most scholars saw caste to be a closed system where 'entry into a social status was a function of heredity and individual achievement, personal quality or wealth had, according to the strict traditional prescription, no say in determining the social status' (Majumdar, 1958:19), there were some who argued that the way caste operated at the local level was 'radically different from that expressed in the varna scheme. Mutual rank was uncertain and arguable and this stemmed from the fact that mobility was possible in caste' (Srinivas, 1976:175). Similarly, stressing the significant role that secular factors played in determining status ranking at the local level, Srinivas argued:

> The articulated criteria of ranking were usually ritual, religious or moral resulting in concealing the importance of secular criteria. The influence of the latter was, however, real. For instance, while landownership and numerical strength were crucial in

improving caste rank, any claim to high rank had to be expressed in ritual and symbolic terms. But at any given moment there were inconsistencies between secular position and ritual rank (Srinivas, 1976:176).

Dube identified six factors that contributed towards the status differentiation in the village community of Shamirpet: religion and caste; landownership; wealth; position in government service and village organisation; age; and distinctive personality traits (Dube, 1955:161). Attempts to claim a higher ritual status through, what Srinivas called sanskritisation, was not a simple process. It could not be achieved only through a ritual and life-style imitation and had to be also negotiated with the local power structure.

> Ambitious castes, or local sections of them, tried to borrow the customs, ritual and life-style of the higher castes in an effort to move up. That was the way to be one up on one's structural neighbours. The locally dominant caste was an obstacle to mobility for several reasons. In the first place, such mobility had the potential of threatening its own ambition if not position. Second, it could result in a chain reaction which could then lead to the suspension of the flow and services and goods from dependent castes (*ibid*:175-76).

Similarly, stressing secular factors, Dube pointed to the manner in which the caste panchayat of the lower or the menial castes worked as unions to secure their employment and strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis the land owning dominant castes. As he illustrates from his study:

It is not easy for an agriculturist to remove a family attached to his household and secure services of another.... His difficulty will not be in dismissing him but in finding a substitute. Each of these castes have a developed inter-village council. Occupational castes have developed trade unionism.... No one else would be willing to act as a substitute, for fear of being penalised by the caste panchayat. It may be even difficult for a number of families to join together and import a family belonging to that occupational caste from a different village... (Dube, 1955:60).

However, normally the caste system was viewed as functioning in the context of the village community. The jajmani system was seen to be binding together different castes living in a village or a group of neighbouring villages in enduring and pervasive relationships.

Land and Class

The social anthropologists studying India during the fifties and sixties generally worked in the framework of caste. The manner in which social science disciplines developed in India, class and land came to be the concerns of economists (Beteille, 1974a:7-34). However, since the anthropological perspective also defined itself as a perspective that studied "small communities" in holistic terms, agriculture and the social relations of production on land did find a place in the village monographs. While some of them directly focused on economic life as one of the central research questions, most saw it as an aspect of the caste and occupational structure of the village.

Land relations, for most anthropologists, reflected generally the same patterns of hierarchy as those present in the caste system. Srinivas, for example wrote:

> Caste was not the only area for the expression of hierarchical ideas. Landownership patterns were inegalitarian in as much as there were a few big landowners at the top, each of whom owned a sizeable quantity of land while at the bottom were small landowners many of whom were also tenants, and they were followed by tenants. Many tenants hired themselves out as labourers during transplantation and harvesting.

> ....There was a certain amount of overlap between the twin hierarchies of caste and land. The richer landowners generally came from such high castes as Brahmins, ... and Lingayats while the Harijans contributed a substantial number of landless labourers.... In contrast to the wealthier household, the poor one was almost invisible (Srinivas, 1976:169).

Some studies underlined the primacy of land over all other factors in determining social hierarchy in the village. Comparing a Brahmin dominated village with a Jat dominated village, Lewis argued:

> While the landowners are generally of higher caste in Indian villages, it is their position as landowners, rather than caste membership per se, which gives them status and power. In Karimpur, where Brahmins are landowners, the traditional caste hierarchy prevails. But in Rampura the Jats own the land and the Brahmins are subservient to them (Lewis, 1958:81).

Most of the Brahmins in Rampura were occupancy tenants of the Jats and therefore subservient to them almost in every respect *(ibid*: 60). While status could come from one's caste, power was almost always a function of land. 'Ownership of land was the best understood road to personal and familial prestige. Landownership meant not only wealth and status but power over people' (Srinivas, 1976:110). The Brahmins who pursued secular occupations commanded more prestige than the priestly Brahmins who were 'frequently poor and dependent upon gifts from those who were better off'(*Ibid*:211). In the north Indian village studied by Majumdar also the conventional respect that the Brahmins enjoyed did not match with their status in everyday life in the village. Thakurs, the landowners, were 'the most influential group in the village because they were economically better off. They owned most of the agricultural land in the village. They gave employment to the other caste people. The various castes served the Thakurs as their dependants (Majumdar, 1955:193). Gough also pointed to the presence of attached and bonded labour relations in the Tanjore village she studied. These relations typically resulted from the indebtedness of the poor Adi Dravidas when 'they borrowed money from a particular Brahmin landlord' (Gough,1960:92).

Though mostly carried-out in the framework of caste, village studies did point to the crucial role that land ownership patterns played in village social life. Even the status of caste groups was not exclusively determined by their ritual practices. However, village studies did not explore the details of agrarian social structures in different regions of the country. Their primary focus continued to be the institutions of caste, family, kinship and religion.

Gender Differences

It is rather interesting to note that although 'gender' as a conceptual category had not yet been introduced in the social sciences when the social anthropologists were doing their field studies during 1950s and 1060s, village studies were not completely "gender blind". Since the concept of gender and the accompanying theoretical issues had yet to be articulated, the social anthropologists did not look at man-woman relations in the manner in which it was to be conceptualised and studied later. However, many of the village monographs provide detailed accounts of the patterns of social relations between men and women in the rural society of India. Some of these monographs even have separate chapters devoted to the subject.

In the absence of a critical theoretical perspective and having been carried-out largely within empiricistic perspectives, the village studies constructed gender and patriarchy as a 'natural social order'. Further, accounts of man-woman relations provided in these studies were largely based on the data collected from male informants. Most of the anthropologists themselves being males, it would have been difficult for them to be able to meet and participate in the "private" life of the village people. Some of them were aware of this lacuna in their field-work. Recalling his experiences in a Kashmir village Madan confessed:

> I never was able to meet with all the women but only with young girls and relatively old women.... This limitation was never overcome and undoubtedly affected the quality of the material I was able to obtain...(Madan, 1975:141)

Even where they were able to meet women, the male anthropologists could not make the women speak. As Majumdar admits:

When we discussed their husbands with the women, they never opened out, and any question regarding their future, they would avoid answering, saying that they did not know, or we should ask their husbands (Majumdar, 1958: 205).

However, despite these obvious limitations, there are extensive descriptions of the relations and differences between men and women in the 'village studies' and these references provide a useful source not only for critiquing Indian social anthropology, but perhaps also for reconstructing the social structure of patriarchy in rural India during the early years of Independence.

Most village studies constructed gender relations within the framework of the household, and participation of women in work. These studies highlighted the division of labour within the family and the overall dominance that men enjoyed in the public sphere. Women, particularly among the upper castes, were confined within the four walls of the house. 'The social world of the woman was synonymous with the household and kinship group while the men inhabited a more heterogeneous world' (Srinivas, 1976:137). Compared to men in a central Indian village studied by Mayer 'women had less chance to meet people from other parts of the village. The village well provided a meeting place for all women of non-Harijan castes, and the opportunity for gossip. But there was a limit to the time that busy women could stand and talk while they drew their water and afterwards they must return home, where the occasions for talking to people outside their own household were limited to meeting with other women of the street' (Mayer, 1960:136). In the Telangana village also, Dube observed that women were secluded from the activities of the public space. 'It was considered a mark of respectability in women if they walked with their eyes downcast' (Dube, 1955:18).

Friendship in the village was recognised as a relationship that did not always operate along the caste lines though it usually developed among people of equal social and economic status. Gender was significant here too. While for boys friendships lasted to mature years, girls were often married away, and after marriage so completely absorbed in their households that they rarely took interest in forming new friendships within the community into which they were married (Sarma, 1960:195). Because of their limited social experience, women could not develop some of the important skills that most men could without any formal training. In the Deccan village, for example, while almost all men were bi-lingual, only a few women could speak any language other than their mother tongue (Dube, 1955:19).

The rules of patriarchy were clearly laid out. After caste, gender was the most important factor that governed the division of labour in the village. Masculine and feminine pursuits were clearly distinguished (Dube, 1955:169). In Shivapur, the village he studied, Ishwaran wrote:

> The world of men and women... are totally segregated. The sexes are first of all physically segregated. Women work in the home, men at home or in the field. At public meetings, women sit in one corner, or in an adjoining room. Women have one place and kind of social activity, men another. Women worship at certain times and places and in certain ways, men in others. Men participate actively in politics; women, to the extent they do participate, do so passively (Ishwaran, 1968:34).

Writing on similar lines about his village in the same region, Srinivas pointed out that the two sets of occupations were not only separated but also seen as unequal:

It was the male head of the household who carried on the traditional caste occupation, be it agriculture, smithy, trade or priesthood. And there was unseated assumption that his occupation was important one and that all other activities of the household either supplementary or subordinate. This assumption was the principle on which the household activities were organized. Thus while it was the man's job to raise the crop, it was the woman's to look after his food and comfort (Srinivas, 1976:137).

It was the man who exercised control over the domestic economy. He made the annual grain-payments at harvest to the members of the artisan and servicing castes who had worked for him during the year.... Women were thought to be incapable of understanding what went on outside the domestic wall. (*ibid*:140-1).

Men also controlled the sexuality of women. In the monogamous family, popular among most groups in India, the ideal was that the husband and wife should be faithful to each other but villagers took a far more serious view of the wife's lapses.

A man could play around but not so a woman. A man's sense of private property in his wife's genital organs was as profound as in his ancestral land. And just as, traditionally, a wife lacked any right to land she lacked an exclusive right to her husband's sexual prowess. Polygyny and concubinage were both evidence of her lack of such rights. Men and women were separate and unequal (ibid, 155).

Patriarchy and male dominance was legitimised by traditional norms. Dube writes:

According to the traditional norms of the society a husband is expected to be an authoritative figure whose will should always dominate the domestic scene. As the head of the household he should demand respect and obedience from his wife and children. The wife should regard him as her 'master' and should 'serve him faithfully' (Dube, 1955:141).

While femininity in the rural society of India was constructed in terms of submission and privacy, maleness was seen in terms of power and control over the women as well as the ability to provide for a family. 'A 'manly' husband kept his wife under control. She was not supposed to talk back to him or sulk or nag unduly' (*ibid*:155).

As an institution, family was quite strong in the village society. Family was idealised as a group working with solidarity and co-operation. The institution of family was also supposed to work 'as a model for the whole community'. The ideal family, it was emphasised,

> should work on the principle of 'one for all and all for one'. Different members of the family should function like an organized team, and have mutual trust and understanding. Toleration, goodwill and a sense of give-and-take among its members are for the well-being and prosperity of the family (Dube, 1955:138).

The most important for the family was its privacy and women were invested with the responsibility of guarding it. A woman was expected to submit and tolerate her husband even if he was violent. "If the husband beats the wife, her crying should not be loud enough to attract curious sympathisers into the house"(*ibid*:139). However, the ideology of family was

considerably "diluted" as one went down in the caste hierarchy so much so that among the lower castes it was difficult to find any traces of these ideals.

Gender and Caste

Gender inequalities intermingled with those of caste. The ideology of caste governed the relationships among the men and women of various caste groups. The most significant way in which caste ideology of purity-impurity influenced women in specific was the attitude of the upper caste families towards the monthly menstrual cycle of women. Menstruation led to their temporary impurity and their segregation from the rest of the family. Mandelabum pointed out that it was strongly believed among the upper castes that during their menstrual cycle 'women must be secluded and should take care to avoid being seen by a priest and must not approach anything which was sacrosanct, whether it be a temple or the hearth of kitchen' (Mandelbaum, 1955:230).

The menstrual impurity of women did not mean only a temporary seclusion of women within the household, it also had wider implications. It defined the relationship of the upper caste women with the men of the servicing castes. For example, a washerman considered it beneath his status to wash the clothes of the women of his patron's family. 'No washerman would personally handle the menstrual saree from the patron and wash. This job was done by the washerman's wife. These clothes were washed separately. Similarly the dresses of the mother of a new born child were also washed by the washerwomen' (Srinivas, 1976:146).

The caste differences also influenced women's participation in work. However, there was an inverse relationship between the status of the caste and position of women and their participation in public life. 'The income of a household, and the degree to which its style of life was Sanskritised, were significant in determining whether women participated in agricultural work or not. Generally women from the richest households and the highest castes remained confined to their homes while women from the poorest households and lowest castes worked outside for cash wages' (Srinivas, 1976:137). Gough, in her study of Tanjore villages also observed that agricultural labour was valued more among the untouchables and consequently the status of women within the family among these castes was higher than among the middle and the upper castes. Women also contributed a higher proportion of their earnings to the household than did men. Men spent money on teashops, on tobacco for chewing, and occasionally on bus rides or cinema tickets. Women chewed tobacco less than men and seldom entered teashops, rode buses or saw a film (Gough, 1989:305). Similarly Majumdar found that the lower caste women could "violate" the rules of patriarchy more comfortably while the upper caste women were more "conformist".

> ...Chamar women work as wage labourers quite often, but they seldom give their earning to their husbands. This is contrary to the accepted custom and cannons of social behaviour.... Chamar women go against the accepted domestic rules in another way too, for they sometimes eat their food before their husbands have eaten theirs, whereas among other castes women generally partake of their food only after the husbands have finished their meal (Majumdar, 1958:205).

In the Telangana village also, among the potters, both men and women could work on the wheel and the same was true of the washerman's caste, while among the Brahmins, only men performed priestly functions and women had no share in this task. Same was the case with the other upper castes where 'the respective fields of men and women were well defined' (Dube, 1955:172). However, the women among upper castes too were not completely powerless. Though they had to bear the "burden of tradition" much more than their counterparts among the lower castes, they also influenced the decision making in the household through the strategies that Scott described as 'weapons of the weak'(Scott,1985). They 'had certain well developed techniques for making known their views: they would go into long sulks, refuse food, nag continuously, appeal to elderly kinsmen over the head of the husband, and so on' (Srinivas, 1976:141). Similarly, in a few cases individual personality also mattered though in a limited way. 'A wife who had strong personality took over jobs which were not usually regarded as hers. But even she did not take over jobs which were exclusively men's' (*ibid*, 147).

However, despite the extensive references that village studies provide on man-woman relations and also the repeated statements about the existing gender inequalities in the rural society of India, these differences were not seen or interpreted to provide a critical understanding of the social structure of patriarchy. On the contrary, some of these anthropologists saw these relations as being quite compatible with the social structure of the village. Constructing it in a completely harmonious system of role difference and interdependence, Ishwaran writes about his study village:

Shivapur is a man's world. Domination by men colours every aspect of life. But this remark, left unqualified, would be misleading. Certainly women do not feel themselves to be ill-treated. For every right that the man has he has a corresponding duty. For every duty that the woman has she has a corresponding right.... It is the duty of the man to lead, just as it is the duty of the woman to follow. It is also the duty of the man to accept responsibility, and the duty of woman to 'take no thought for the morrow' (Ishwaran, 1968:34).

Such representations were obviously based on the information that these anthropologists gathered from their male informants. Though they saw themselves as neutral observers, their perspectives that constructed village as a community structured around the principle of interdependence and reciprocity ended up presenting gender inequalities in terms of functional role differentiation. The fact that these relations were also relations of domination and subordination sustained by the ideology of patriarchy was rarely pointed out even when their own data suggested that this was the case.

Village Politics and Social Conflict

Quite like gender relations, village studies also explored the political processes operating in the rural society of India even though their theoretical framework did not directly raise the questions that would see the village in terms of conflict among competing interests. It was the 'holistic' approach to the village that made them look at issues of local politics as well.

Much of the discussion on political processes in the village studies was centred around the politics of factions. 'Division of a village into two or more mutually opposed factions was a permanent feature of rural social structure' (Srinivas, 1976:221). Factions, however, were different from other units of the village social structure. Unlike caste and lineage, the membership of a faction was to an extent more open. They were "modern" institutions, so to speak, and had gained momentum with the introduction of adult franchise and the Panchayati Raj after Independence. However, factions were not completely autonomous, they intermingled with other structures in the rural society. 'Landownership, and caste and lineage provided the basis for factions' (*ibid*:221). The leader of a faction was invariably one of the big landowners of the village, who also belonged to the 'dominant caste'. Lewis identified the following factors in order of preference that determined who could become a leader: wealth, family reputation, age and geneological position, personality traits, state of retirement, education, connections and influence with outsiders, and , finally, numerical strength of the family and lineage. Wealth was a basic criterion for leadership (Lewis, 1958:127). Similarly caste too was critical. In the Kerala village, studied by Miller, there was a clear distinction between the political sphere and the ritual sphere. While the Brahmin Nambudiri family provided priests for the local temple, it was the Nayar caste which held political authority and economic control. The hereditary village headship belonged to the wealthiest Nayar family (Miller, 1960:45).

The new panchayat system was seen to have increased 'factionalism' in the village which disrupted its ability for joint action (Mandelbaum, 1960:120). However, though factions divided the village, their effect was not always seen as being divisive and their existence did

not necessarily contradict the unity-reciprocity framework. On the contrary, Srinivas argued that:

> A faction was a 'vertical' group in the sense that it brought together individuals in different economic categories, and from different castes. The clients of each landowner in the faction had either direct relations with the faction leader, or had them mediated through an immediate patron. Factions were certainly a manifestation of inegalitarian- ism but they forged strong bonds between unequal partners and provided yet another countervailing force to the horizontal ties of caste and class (Srinivas, 1976:221).

Some studies also looked at the way village politics was linked with the broader political process at the regional and the national level. Beteille, for example, argued against 'looking at the village level political conflict exclusively in terms of cleavages within its structure'. This kind of an approach, he argued, tends

> to view village as an autonomous unit and divert attention from broader political forces which operate from outside. Any study of political process within the village will be incomplete unless it shows how such processes are articulated with the regional political system.... Political alignments and cleavages in the village have to be considered not only in relation to the features of its social structure, but also in terms of the divisions and tensions in regional society. In this village may be regarded as a point at which forces operating over a much wider field converge and intersect (Beteille, 1996:142).

Village politics was not only being integrated into the broader political system but also the source of power was changing during the post-independence period. While 'in the traditional set-up, power within the village was closely linked with the landownership and high ritual status', in the changing scenario, many other factors had begun to assume significance, the most important being the numerical strength of a caste group. There were those whose power was based on the ownership and control over land and there were those who drew their support from the numerically preponderant groups. There was also an emerging conflict between the power of the big landowner and that of the popular leader. Thus, in place of factions, Beteille conceptualised village politics in terms of 'power blocks' (*ibid*:143-4).

New organs and institutions were affecting village politics in a fundamental way. In these organs membership and control were based on principles which were very different from those which operated in a traditional society. However, those advocates of Panchayati Raj who based their argument on the assumption that the village was a community in which people could come together on equal terms, had their assumptions wrong. The Panchayat system 'imposed a democratic structure on a social substratum which was segmental and hierarchical in nature. Although the formal structure of power was democratic, the value system within which it operated was inegalitarian' (*ibid*:164).

'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).

The 'field-view' was a superior way of understanding contemporary Indian society as it

provided a "corrective" to the "partial" 'book-view' of India constructed by Indologists from

the classical Hindu texts. The 'book-view' was partial not only because it was based on texts

written in "ancient times", it was partial also because, the texts used by the Indologists were

all written by the 'elite' upper caste Hindus. In contrast, the anthropological perspective used

a "scientific method" of inquiry and provided a "holistic" picture of the way social life was

organised in the Indian society at the level of its "grassroots".

"Insiders" and "Outsiders"

It was in the preoccupation with presenting a scientific account of the village life that made

many of the social anthropologists raise questions about the problems of "insider/outsider"

with respect to the "community" being studied. This problem, in a way, was specific to the

Indian situation where many of the anthropologists were themselves of Indian origin.

Conventionally, the discipline of anthropology had developed in the West and the Western-

white scholars went and lived with tribal communities elsewhere in the world where the field-

worker, by definition, was an outsider. The issue was critical also because the classical

founders of the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology had foregrounded the need

for objectivity and value-neutrality as one of the most important professional skills to be mastered if one was produce a "scientific" account of social reality. Thus, their training as "objective observer" on the one hand and their close familiarity with the native society on the other made them acutely anxious about their ability to construct a neutral account of the village. 'A field-worker born and brought up within that very culture', Dube argued, 'may overlook certain trends, and may even unconsciously seek to rationalize and justify some elements in the life of his community'. These problems, however were not beyond solutions. They could be solved to a considerable extent by 'a proper scientific training'. However, 'ideally the association of someone with a different cultural background with such a community research would perhaps provide the most satisfactory corrective' (Dube, 1955:11). In a similar mode that privileged 'outsider' over the 'insider', Srinivas argued:

> It is much more difficult for an Indian to observe his own society than it is for a non-Indian.... One is so fundamentally enslaved in one's own society, that detachment is well-nigh impossible. Such detachment is necessary if one wants to present an account of one's society which is intelligible to others (Srinivas,1960:5).

The 'sense of familiarity' that the native scholars had with their own society tended to 'deaden instead of stimulating curiosity' and there was 'a tendency to take things for granted. Srinivas suggested that ideally, before working in one's own society, the social anthropologist should, as an exercise, carry-out field-work in an "alien" culture (*ibid*, 1960:4-5).

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 from different sections of rural society, they give vivid descriptions of how their own location and social background influenced and conditioned their observations of the village society and their access to different sections of people in the rural society. 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 social structure of the village imposed itself upon the investigator. 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, but he was also asked to conform to the normative patterns of the caste society. The anthropologist could not avoid negotiating with the village social structure mainly 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 routine way of developing contact 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 caste and middle class background, it was easier for them to approach and develop rapport with 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. Recognising 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 recognised, had serious implications for his field work. 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, second emphasis added).

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 "field-work", 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 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 field-work 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 recognises 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, even the scholars from the West had to come to terms with the statuses that the village gave them and which caste groups they would get more closely identified with. The British scholar, Adrian Mayer, who studied a Central Indian village 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.

Though the village social structure invariably imposed itself upon the "participant observer", it was not completely impossible to work without being identified with one of the dominant castes. There were some who made concerted efforts to understand what the caste system meant to those who were at the receiving end. It is not surprising that the image of hierarchy as it appeared from the bottom up was very different from its "mainstream" constructions. Mencher, who chose deliberately to spend more time among the "Harijans" writes:

> ...most of the Harijans I got to know tended to describe their relations with higher-caste people in terms of power, both economic (in terms of who employed whom, or their dependence on the landed for employment) and political (in terms of authority and the ability to punish).

> For Harijans both old and young, the exploitative aspect of hierarchy was what seemed most relevant, not the "to each his own" aspect. I did not once in my time in any of these villages hear from Harijans the usual rationalizations of inequalities in

terms of Hindu religion, or in terms of social harmony. To them it was all quite clearly a system in which some people worked harder than others, and in which those who were rich and powerful remained so, and obviously had no intention of relinquishing their prerogative voluntarily (Mencher, 1975:119 and 127).

However, apart from a few exceptions of those doing agrarian studies (Mencher,1978; Djurfeldt and Lindberg,1975; Harriss;1982), it was only later when the Dalit movement consolidated itself in different parts of the country, that social anthropologists and sociologists began to examine the question of power and politics of caste relations.

CONCLUSIONS

The studies of Indian villages carried-out by social anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s were undoubtedly an important landmark in the history of Indian social sciences. The detailed descriptions of the village social life in different parts of India contained in these monographs provide a valuable source for writing a history of contemporary India. Even though the primary focus of these studies was on the social and ritual life of the village people, there are enough references that can be useful pointers towards an understanding of the political and economic life in the rural society of India during the first two decades of independent India. One example of this could be the references to man-woman relations in the rural society of India. Even though the concept of gender had not yet become popular in the social sciences, the "holistic" perspective made the anthropologists document different aspects of family life, gender relations, women's participation in work and the ritual life or their relations with other institutions in the village.

More importantly, these studies helped in contesting the dominant stereotype of the Indian village made popular by the colonial administrators. The detailed descriptive accounts of village life constructed after prolonged field-works carried out, in most cases, entirely by the anthropologists themselves[9] convincingly proved how Indian villages were not 'isolated communities'. Village studies showed that India's villages had been well integrated into the broader economy and society of the region even before the colonial rule introduced new agrarian legislation. They also pointed to the regional differences in the way social village life was organised in different parts of the country.

Social anthropological studies also offered an alternative to the dominant "book-view" of India constructed by Indologists and orientalists from the Hindu scriptures. The "field-view" presented in the village monographs not only contested the assumptions of indology but also convincingly showed with the help of empirical data as to how the idealised model of the varna system as theorised in Hindu scriptures did not match with the concrete realities of village life. While caste was an important institution in the Indian village and most studies foregrounded caste differences over other differences, empirical studies showed that it was not a completely closed and rigidly defined system. Caste statuses were also not exclusively determined by one's position in the ritual hierarchy and that there were many grey and contestable areas within the system.

It was from the village studies that the concepts like sanskritisation, dominant caste, segmental structures, harmonic and disharmonic systems emerged. Above all village studies proved the usefulness of field-work for a social scientific understanding of the Indian society. It was

partly because the success of the village studies that field work came to acquire respectability in other social science disciplines in India as well.

However, village studies were also constrained by a number of factors. The method of participant observation that was the main strength of these studies, also imposed certain limitations on the field-workers which eventually proved critical in shaping the image they produced of the Indian village. Doing participant observation required a measure of acceptability of the field worker in the village that he/she chose to study. In a differentiated social context, it was obviously easy to approach the village through the dominant sections. However, this choice proved to be of more than just a strategic value. The anxiety of the anthropologist to get accepted in the village as a member of the "community" made their accounts of the village life conservative in orientation. It also limited their access to the dominant groups in the local society. They chose to avoid asking all those questions or approaching those subordinate groups, which they thought, could offend the dominant interests in the village. The choices made by individual anthropologists as regard to how they were going to negotiate their own relationship with the village significantly influenced the kind of data they could gather about village life. Unlike the "tribal communities", the conventional subject matter of social anthropology, Indian villages were not only internally differentiated much more than the tribes, they also had well articulated world views. Different sections of the village society had different perspectives on what the village was. Though most of the anthropologists were aware of this, they did not do much to resolve this problem. On the contrary, most of them consciously chose to identify themselves with the dominant caste groups in the village, which apart from making their stay in the village relatively easy, limited

their access to the world-view of the upper castes and made them suspect among the lower

castes.

It was the upper caste bias of these scholars that made scholars like Srinivas underline the

supposed "vertical unity" among caste groups in the village and interpret social and economic

differences among them in terms of reciprocity and interdependence. It was not merely Wiser

and Srinivas who conceptualised the Jajmani system in the framework of reciprocal exchange

relations, many other scholars also used similar kinds of language. Kolenda, for example

defined the Jajmani system as 'an institution made up of a network of roles and norms

integrated into the system as a whole and legitimised and supported by general cultural values'

(Kolenda, 1981:14). Similarly, Beidelman conceptualised Jajmani relations as a system of

hereditary obligations of payments and occupational and ceremonial duties between two or

more specific families of different castes in the same locality' (Beidelman, 1959:6).

These conceptions of village social order assumed that the ideology of Jajmani system and

hierarchy was accepted as a 'natural order' of things by everyone, including those at the

bottom of the hierarchy. However, the few scholars who attempted to make those at the

bottom of the hierarchy speak had a very different story to tell, as it is evident from Mencher's

account presented above. It was not just the caste system that was constructed as a "natural

order of things", gender differences too were viewed in the same kind of perspective. Despite

documenting and extensively refering to the differences and inequalities marking man-woman

relations in the village, hardly anyone attempted to project them as relations of power and

domination or attempted to understand them in a critical perspective.

Apart from the method of participant observation and the anxiety about being accepted in rural society that made the anthropologists produce a conservative account of the rural social relations, the received theoretical perspectives and the professional traditions dominant within the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology during the time of village studies also had their influences on these scholars. Anthropologist during the decades of fifties and sixties generally focussed on the structures rather than changes. This preoccupation made them look for the sources that reproduced social order in the village and to ignore conflict and the possible sources of social transformation.

Nearly universal acceptance of structural-functionalism in the two disciplines played its own role in overemphasising the need to understand what produced order. It also asked for a value neutral position on the part of the researchers vis-a-vis the social context being studied. There was no place for a historical perspective in this framework. Though the anthropologists found evidence for the fact that neither the village nor the caste system was an unchanging reality, the absence of a historical perspective and their functionalist empiricism made them project a picture of the Indian society which tended to essentialise its social structure in the caste system. Almost every thing in village was shown to be operating within the logic of caste. Even non Hindu groups, such as Muslims, were presented in a manner as though they were just another caste in the village[10] .

The functionalist theory saw the process of change in Third World societies in terms of a transformation of the traditional social order into a modern society that would resemble the societies of the West. This dichotomous framework of 'modernisation theory' reimposed the colonial presumption that the Indian village, above all, was a concrete example of the

traditional social order. Village studies were seen to be an exercise in unpacking this traditional order. There were no attempts to critically examine the popular concepts at the time and their sources. 'Village', 'caste', 'tribe', 'religion', 'tradition', 'civilisation' or even 'jajmani system', were all taken over from the earlier colonial discourses on India by the social anthropologists without any apparent reflections or hesitations. Theoretical resources too were borrowed from the Western academy with a sense of faith[111] .

Though the two did not have any direct relationship, one can rather easily draw parallels between the Indian village studies and the American tradition of rural sociology. They seem to come together in their constructions of rurality. While the Indian village was constructed as an example of traditional social order, an opposite of the modern Western society, the rural sociology also used a similar framework to construct rural community as simple, harmonious and characterised by intimate relations as a sociological opposite of the urban. The Indian village too was not just an empirical reality, an aspect of the Indian society with its own historical and geographical specificities, but as a reality *sui generis* , a social fact that could be studied and theorised in its own right.

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Notes

[1] Though I have tried to cover a wide range of village studies, I have focused more on works of the scholars of Indian origin as they have had more influence on the later generations of Indian scholar in the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology. In a sense, it was with the village studies that these disciplines found place for themselves in the Indian universities.

[2] The recent work by Peter Mayer exposes this myth. He argues that historically Jajmani system was of a recent origin and geographically, it was essentially a feature of the gangetic plains. See Mayer, 1993.

[3] See, for example, Dumont, 1970; Karashima, 1984.

[4] It may be relevant to mention here that in the Indian university system the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology are distinguished in the way the two are distinguished in the Western universities. Though the universities in India have separate departments of sociology and anthropology, most practitioners, particularly those doing social anthropology, do not see themselves as being different from sociologists. Some working in the departments of sociology were formally trained as anthropologists. Many universities in India also had common departments of sociology and social anthropology and many of these were separated but the separation has been more for administrative reasons than for the reasons of any professional difference.

[5] Until then, the discipline of anthropology in India, as elsewhere, was mainly preoccupied with the study of tribes, castes and religion.

[6] This was to also create a crisis for the two disciplines later. (See Gouldner, 1971)

[7] Some, such as, Beteille did (Beteille, 1996)

[8] See Appadurai, 1988.

[9] Though in most cases the anthropologists carried out the field work themselves, with or without the help of an investigator but by being personally present in the field through out the field-work, there were some, such as Dube and Majumdar, who also had research teams who did much of the field work for the anthropologist who finally wrote the monograph

[10] See, for example, Dube, 1955; Hiebert, 1971.

[111] Beteille, for example admits that when the village studies were being carried out "...there was little of the kind of theoretical anguish over "empiricism", "positivism" and "structural-functionalism" that was to torment a later generation of anthropologists' (Beteille, 1996:242).