

Unit 3

Village Studies in India

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Provide a historical background to the emergence of 'village studies' in India
- describe the general context in which the village studies were undertaken
- explain the how and why sociologists/social anthropologists chose this field of study
- discuss why the study of villages in India came to gain importance
- outline the general features of the village
- describe the social structure of the village which involves the description of caste, class and gender as significant aspects, and finally
- explain the nature of the 'field view' and the fieldwork done by the sociologists/social anthropologists.

3.1 Introduction

So far you have learnt about the social background of the emergence of sociology in India, its later development and growth and some major issues and themes of research. Village studies, during the 1950s and 1960s constituted a major area of concern and several monographs and papers were published during this period of growth and professionalisation of the discipline. In the present unit you will learn more about these village studies.

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

Apart from it being an important **demographic** and **structural** reality characterising contemporary India, village has also been an important

ideological category, a category through which India has often been imagined and imaged in modern times. The village has been seen as the ultimate signifier of the “authentic native life”, a place where one could see or observe the “real” India and develop an understanding of the way local people organise their social relationships and belief systems. As Andre Beteille writes, ‘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). Institutional patterns of the Indian “village communities” and its cultural values were supposed to be an example of what in the twentieth century came to be known as the “traditional society”.

This unit will provide you an overview of the tradition of “village studies” among sociologists and social anthropologists in India. Apart from looking at the manner in which the village social life was studied, the methods used and issues/questions focussed on, the unit will also offer a critical assessment of the tradition of village studies.

3.2 Historical Background

Though one may find detailed references to village life in ancient and medieval times, it was during the British colonial rule that an image of the Indian village was constructed by the colonial administrators that was to have far reaching implications – ideological as well as political – for the way Indian society was to be imagined in the times to come.

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. ‘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).

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 (see Jodhka 2002).

In the post-Independence India also ‘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 sociologists and social anthropologists working on India. They carried-out a large number of studies focussing on the social and cultural life of the village in India. Most of these studies were published during the decades 1950s and 1960s. These “village studies” played an important role in giving respectability to the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology in India.

Generally basing their accounts on first-hand fieldwork, carried out mostly in a single village, social anthropologists focused on the structures of social relationships, institutional patterns, beliefs and value systems of the rural people. 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 fieldwork based understanding of Indian society, or what came to be known as “field-view” of the India, different from the then dominant “book-view” of India, which was developed by the Indologists and orientalist from classical Hindu scriptures.

3.3 The Context

After the colonial administrators/ethnographers, it was the “young” discipline of social anthropology that took up the study of Indian village during 1950s and 1960s in a big way. This new interest in the village social life was a direct offshoot of the newly emerged interest in the study of the peasantry in the Western academy.

Emergence of the so-called “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. Thus, apart from industrialisation, one the main agenda for the new political regimes was the transformation of their “backward” and stagnant agrarian economy. Though the strategies and priorities differed, ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’ became common programmes in most of the Third World countries.

Understanding the prevailing structures of agrarian relations and working out ways and means of transforming them were recognised as the most important priorities within development studies. 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.

The ‘village community’ was identified as the social foundation of the peasant economy in Asia. It is quite easy to see this connection between the Redfieldian notion of ‘peasant studies’ (Redfield 1965) and the Indian ‘village studies’. The single most popular concept used by the anthropologists studying the Indian village was Robert Redfield’s notion of ‘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 Redfield. He even wrote a preface to this book.

Having found a relevant subject matter in the village, social anthropologists (many of whom were either from the West or were Indian scholars trained

in the Western universities) initiated field studies in the early 1950s. During October 1951 and May 1954 the *Economic Weekly* (which later became *Economic and Political Weekly*) published a number of short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages that were being studied by different anthropologists. These essays were later put together by M.N. Srinivas in the form of a book with the title *India's Villages* in 1955. As mentioned above Mackim Marriot's book *Village India* also appeared in the same year. Interestingly, the first volume of *Rural Profiles* by D.N. Majumdar also appeared in 1955. S.C. Dube also published his full length study of a village near Hyderabad, *Indian Village* in the same year.

Box 3.01: Views of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru on Village in India

Mahatma Gandhi in his letter to Shri Jawaharlal Nehru on October 5, 1945 originally written in Hindi expressed his views on village, in general and specially in India. He wrote “..... I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live in peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth. I hold that without truth and non-violence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realise truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of village life.....”

Jawaharlal Nehru, in his reply to Babu's letter, wrote amongst other things, that, “The whole question is how to achieve this society and what its content should be. I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent.” (The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol. IV. Selected Letters General Editor Shriman Narian. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. pp. 98-101)

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.

3.4 Field and the Fieldwork

An anthropologist typically selected a single “middle” sized village where he/she carried-out an intensive fieldwork, 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 “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.

Box 3.02: Participant Observation

The method of participant observation also provided continuity between the earlier tradition of anthropology when it studied the tribal communities and its later preoccupation with the village. As Beteille writes:

In moving from tribal to village studies, social anthropologists retained one very important feature of their craft, the method of intensive 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).

3.5 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 playing an important role in providing 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 village near Delhi 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 supposed to only assist the ‘big brothers’ economists in the planning process, the anthropologist viewed their perspective as being “superior” because ‘they alone studied village community as a whole, and their knowledge and approach provided an indispensable background for the proper interpretation of data on any single aspect of rural life. Their approach provided a much-needed corrective to the partial approach of the economist, political scientist and social worker (Srinivas, 1955:90).

Anthropologists criticised economists and official planners view because they 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 in professional terms. Taking a position against the close involvement with official agencies, 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 cannot lay down policy because it is a result of certain decisions about right and wrong' (Srinivas, 1960:13). Thus maintaining a "safe" distance from the political agencies was seen to be necessary because, unlike economics, social anthropology did not have a theoretical grounding that could help them become applied sciences.

The relevance of studying the village was viewed more in methodological terms. The village and its hamlets represented "**India in microcosm**" (Hoebel in Hiebert, 1971:vii). For the anthropologist, they 'were invaluable **observation-centres** where he/she could study in detail social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India' (Srinivas 1955: 99). Villages were supposedly 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'. This perceived 'historical continuity and stability of villages' strengthened the case for village studies (Dasgupta, 1978:1).

Carrying-out village studies during the fifties and the sixties was also important because the Indian society was changing very fast and the anthropologist needed to record details of the traditional social order before it was too late. Underscoring this urgency Srinivas 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, 1955: 99)

3.6 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 villages were alike.

The stereotypical image of the Indian village as a self-sufficient community

was contested by anthropological studies. Beteille, for example, argued ‘at least as far back in time as living memory went, there was no reason to believe that the village (he studied) was fully self-sufficient in the economic sphere (Beteille, 1996:136-7). Similarly Srinivas too contested the colonial notion of the Indian village being a completely self-sufficient republic. The village, he argued, ‘was always a part of a wider entity. (Srinivas, 1960:10).

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 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.

Village provided 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 argued that though 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, village communities all over the Indian sub-continent had a number of common features. The village settlement, as a unit of social organisation, represented a kind of solidarity which was different from that of the kin, the caste, and the class. Each village was a distinct entity, had some individual mores and usages, and possessed a corporate unity. Different castes and communities inhabiting the village were integrated in its economic, social, and ritual pattern by ties of mutual and reciprocal obligations sanctioned and sustained by generally accepted conventions. Notwithstanding the existence of groups and factions inside the settlement, people of the village could, and did, face the outside world as an organised, compact whole (Dube,1960:202).

Reflection and Action 3.01

Read a sociologists study of an Indian village and then read a novel, such as, Shreelal Shukl’s ‘Ragdarbari’ in Hindi or R.K. Narian’s ‘Malgudi Day’s’ in English.

Write down an essay on the depiction of an Indian village, as given by a sociologist and compare it with the account of an Indian village by a creative writer. Compare your essay with those of other students at your Study Centre.

It was W.H. 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. 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.

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. 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, Beteille had argued that his study of 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).

Among those who nearly rejected the idea of the communitarian unity were Lewis and Bailey. F.G. Bailey, for example 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 sociologist anthropologists during 1950s and 1960s. They continued to work largely within the 'unity-reciprocity' framework, with varied degrees of emphasis.

3.7 Social Structure of the Village: Caste, Class and Gender

The intellectual and historical contexts in which social anthropologists worked 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.

Despite their primary 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, almost every one of them 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.

i) 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 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.

An individual in caste society lived in a hierarchical world. Not only were the people divided into higher or lower groups, their food, their dresses, ornaments, customs and manners were all ranked in an order of hierarchy. Anthropologist invariably invoked the *varna* system of hierarchy which 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 that were regarded as relatively 'clean' and were not classed as "untouchables". In the fifth major category were placed all the "untouchable" castes. Hindus all over India, according to Dube, accepted this classification.

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 them. 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 being 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 *varna* 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, 1994:5).

Caste divisions determined and decided all social relations. Most scholars saw caste as 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). However, there were some who admitted that the way caste operated at the local level was 'radically different from that expressed in the varna scheme. Mutual rank was uncertain and this stemmed from the fact that mobility was possible in caste' (Srinivas, 1976:175).

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 rituals and life-style imitation. The group had to also negotiate it at the local power structure. 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.

However, a large majority of them viewed caste system as working within the framework of *jajmani* system and bound together different castes living in the village or a cluster of villages in enduring and pervasive relationships.

Reflection and Action 3.02

You just read about the sociologists' opinion about caste in India based on their own studies/field-work. As a person you may have come across caste as a social reality. Think about your own experiences and write a report on 'Caste in India' in about two pages.

Discuss your report with other students of sociology at your Study Centre, as well as, your Academic Counsellor.

ii) Land and Class

As is evident from the above discussion, 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 seen as the concerns of economists. However, since anthropologists advocated a perspective that studied "small communities" in holistic terms, agriculture and the social relations of production on land also found 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 to them reflected the same patterns of hierarchy as those present in the caste system. '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 others 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 that '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' (Lewis, 1958:81). However, despite such references to the crucial significance of land ownership in village social life, village studies did not explore the details of agrarian social structures in different regions of the country. Caste, family, kinship and religion remained their primary focus.

iii) 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 1960s, 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. Still, 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, 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 quite aware of this lacuna in their fieldwork and have written about it in their reflections on their fieldwork experience.

Most village studies looked at 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 the 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).

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). 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 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. The dominant

‘male view’ thought of women as being ‘incapable of understanding what went on outside the domestic wall’ (Srinivas, 1976:140-1).

Men also had a near complete control over women’s sexuality. In the monogamous family, popular among most groups in India, ‘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 were legitimate norms. ‘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).

Box 3.03: Village under Duress

Not every thinker, sociologist or anthropologist agrees with the general opinion of village India as an idyllic social reality. Infact, sociologist like Dipankar Gupta begs to differ. He says that – “The village is shrinking as a sociological reality, though it still exists as space. Nowhere else does one find the level of hopeless disenchantment as one does in the rural regions of India. In urban slums there is squalour, there is filth and crime, but there is hope and the excitement that tomorrow might be quite different from today.

Rarely would a villager today want to be a farmer if given an opportunity elsewhere. Indeed, there are few rural institutions that have not been mauled severely from within. The joint family is disappearing, the rural caste hierarchy is losing its tenacity, and the much romanticised harmony of village life is now exposed for the sham it perhaps always was. **If anything, it is perhaps B.R. Ambedkar’s analysis of the Indian village that strikes the truest of all. It was Ambedkar who said that the village was a cesspool of degradation, corruption and worse.** That village India was able to carry on in spite of all this in the past was because there was little option for most people, rich or poor outside the confines of the rural space. (Gupta, Dipankar, Whither the Indian Village, Culture and Agriculture in ‘Rural’ India, EPW Vol. XL No.8, Feb. 19-25, 2005, pp. 751-758)

3.8 ‘Field-View’ and the Fieldwork

More than anything else, it was the method of participant observation that distinguished the social anthropological village studies from the rural surveys that were conducted by economists and demographers. And it was this method of qualitative fieldwork that helped social anthropology gain a measure of respectability in the Indian academy.

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 which 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”. Even though some of the scholars were themselves from India and therefore had pre-conceived notions about rural society, ‘a proper scientific training’ could take care of such biases.

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 of fieldwork 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 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).

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. Betelle, for example, 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’. His acceptance in the *agraharam* as a co-resident was not without any 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).

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, who ‘regard a visit to their homes by a Brahmin as unnatural, and some believe that it brings them ill luck’ (*ibid*:278).

The village was not only caste conscious, it was also class and gender conscious. As Beteille writes:

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 (*ibid*:284).

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

Srinivas tells us 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.

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

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

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

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

This conformist attitude towards the village social structure and its normative patterns as received through the dominant sections had such an important effect on their fieldwork that some of them quite consciously chose not to spend much time with the “low” caste groups. Srinivas, for example, admits that while he was collecting genealogies and a household census, he ‘deliberately excluded the Harijan ward’. He thought that he ‘should approach the Harijans only through the headman’. The consequence was that his account of the village was biased in favour of the upper caste Hindus. 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 that it was impossible for him merely to “observe” the caste system. He had to participate in it, merely by the fact of my living in Ramkheri. He was accorded the status of ‘an undesignated upper caste’ and by the time he left the village he was most closely identified with Rajputs, the locally dominant caste (Mayer 1975).

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 its 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....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.

3.9 Conclusion

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. 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.

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 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.

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 fieldworkers, 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.

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.

3.10 Further Reading

Beteille, A. 1980 'The Indian Village: Past and Present' in E.J. Hobsbawm et. al. eds. *Peasants in History: Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner*, OUP, Calcutta

Beteille, A. 1975 'The Tribulations of Fieldwork' in A. Beteille and T. N. Madan ed. *Encounters and Experience: Personal Accounts of Fieldwork*. Vikas, Delhi

Cohn, B.S. 1987, *An Anthropologist among Historians and other Essays*. OUP, Delhi