

# Revisiting the Rural in 21st Century India

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The Review of Rural Affairs this time focuses largely on “restudies” of villages that were studied by social anthropologists and economists in the 1950s. The papers are not simply about documenting the unfolding evolutionary process of development, but bring new perspectives of social science understanding to the study of rural society, and also reflect on the enterprise of anthropology and fieldwork. Jamgod in Madhya Pradesh, Sundarana in Gujarat, Bisipara in Odisha, and Palanpur and Khanpur in Uttar Pradesh were restudied, while one paper presents the results of a fresh study of villages in Nagaland.

The early years after India’s independence from colonial rule saw some important and interesting initiatives towards the growth of social science scholarship in India. The British had not only ruled over the subcontinent politically and plundered its economy for some two centuries, they had also shaped narratives about the society, culture and history of the region, much of which was for their own consumption and for circulation in the Western world (Cohn 1987, 1996; Dirks 2001). However, over the years these narratives acquired the status of a common sense about Indian society and even the native nationalist elite accepted and internalised them quite uncritically. According to this common sense, unlike the modern West, India was a land of “tradition.” The most obvious and important institutions that signified Indian tradition were the caste system, the village, and the joint family system (Nehru 1946; also see Jodhka 2002). These were also convenient and useful categories for the nationalists. The colonial narratives on India, while representing it as an “oriental other,” also endorsed India’s unity as a civilisation. These categories produced a naturalised justification for a claim to nationhood. As the region, these categories implicitly presumed that India had a distinct culture and social formation, which had been in existence for centuries. It had even survived the colonial onslaught (Jodhka 1998).

However, the native elite who assumed power in 1947 also saw themselves as change agents. Democracy and development, the new sources of legitimacy for the new nation state and those who held power in the new regime, were also transformative projects. The received wisdom on Indian culture and civilisation, largely drawn from the textual sources popularised by the colonial masters, or the “book view” of India, was of little use in working out plans, policies and visions of change.

Development and modernisation of the post-war “Third World” had become a strategic concern globally. Political masters of the “socialist bloc” of those years, led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), were enthusiastic about helping the newly liberated nation states develop economically to expand their own influence in the emerging world. Similarly, the Western world, led by the United States, was equally eager to engage with the “peasant societies” of the developing nations. The emergent geopolitical scenario also produced a new area of social science research—“development studies”—to explore the specifics of local life in different regions of the developing world, identify impediments to economic growth and progressive social change, and help local states in learning the right lessons: the modes and methods of becoming modern (Mencher 1987; Breman et al 1997).

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**REVIEW OF RURAL AFFAIRS**


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**Village Studies**

It was in this context that the Indian village became a site of producing new kinds of grounded knowledge about the structures and dynamics of the social life of the subcontinent. While the economists working within development studies focused on constructing models of economic acceleration, the social anthropologists proposed to explore the social organisation of traditional cultures through the category of “peasant society.” Peasants were presumed to be inward-looking because of their attachment to land, their way of life focused around agriculture and their preoccupation with a self-sustaining economic life, which also made them resistant to change (Shanin 1987; Redfield 1965). The then influential modernisation theory viewed such a social life and its belief systems as obstructions to economic growth. However, the specifics of these “peasant cultures” varied across regions and countries of the South and needed to be investigated empirically. In the case of India, such a scholarship viewed the village to be the appropriate operational unit of study (Beteille 1974).

The newly born native social anthropologist saw the village to be an important entry point for a grounded understanding of the Indian society for several other reasons as well. First and foremost was its demographic weight. Nine out of every 10 Indians lived in its nearly half a million rural settlements. More importantly perhaps, the colonial imaginations of India had also constructed the village as a kind of hegemonic category, a primary signifier of the authentic native social life (Inden 1990); an idea that had also appealed to some important leaders of the nationalist movement. As is well known, Gandhi was amongst these prominent leaders who saw in the “traditional village life” a possible alternative to Western modernity (Jodhka 2002). Beteille (1980: 108) summarises this popularly held view well. The Indian village, as he writes, “was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilization.”

The “village” thus appeared to be the most relevant empirical site, as well as a methodologically meaningful and convenient entry point for the study of Indian society. Given that the villages were presumably similar to each other, close observations of one village could tell about the “social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India” (Srinivas 1955a: 99). Having found a relevant subject matter in the village, social anthropologists initiated field studies of single villages in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Sachin Chaudhuri, the editor of a newly launched social science journal from Bombay, *The Economic Weekly* (that later became the *Economic & Political Weekly*), encouraged them to publish short reports from their fieldwork in his journal. Many social anthropologists submitted short essays that were published in the journal between 1951 and 1954. For a wider circulation, M N Srinivas put together these essays in the form of a book with the title *India's Villages* (1955b). Several other research papers, monographs and edited volumes on the subject appeared around the same time and over the next two decades or so (Jodhka 1998).

Besides social anthropologists, some economists and political scientists also undertook village studies, though with a

slightly different focus. Most of these early village studies provided an account of the social, economic and cultural life of rural people. Some of the later studies also focused on specific aspects of the rural social structure, such as stratification, kinship, and religion. An anthropologist typically selected a single “middle” sized village for intensive fieldwork, generally staying there for a fairly long period of time, ranging from one to two years, at the end of which the aim was to come out with a “holistic” account of social and cultural life of the village (for a broad overview of village studies see Jodhka 1998; Thakur 2014). These village studies soon became the foundational resource for an empirical social science of Indian society.

Even though at some level, these anthropologists accepted the colonial construct of the Indian village quite uncritically, their studies presented a “field-view” of rural life, which contested the simplistic orientalist “book-view” of India. The field studies pointed to enormous diversities of castes and kinship systems across regions and communities; they questioned the widely held notion of autonomy and isolation of Indian village life. As elsewhere, rural settlements in the subcontinent had always been well integrated into the larger/regional economy and social networks. Caste was also not simply a ritual affair. Some explored the dynamics of power and mobility within the caste system through categories like that of the “dominant caste,” and “sanskritisation.” Some even wrote extensively on land relations and about the differences between men and women, even though they did not have the category of gender at their disposal.

**Revisits in 21st Century India**

By the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, ethnographic studies of a single village gave way to a more focused analysis of subjects like the changing dynamics of agrarian relations, caste and rural power and the problems of rural poverty. Those studying rural social life tended to focus on a larger universe, a region or a cluster of villages. However, the critical turning point for the study of the Indian rural was the last decade of the 20th century. The shifts in Indian economic policy during the early 1990s have had some important implications for social science scholarship. The village society and agrarian economy saw a progressive marginalisation in popular imaginations. Post-1990s India began to be imagined through the social and economic dynamics of its metropolitan centres with its urban middle class occupying centre stage.

But, the rural has not simply gone away. Unlike the experience of the Western world, the growth of urban centres and urban populations in India has not been accompanied by a decline of the rural. Interestingly a greater number of Indians live in rural areas today than they ever did before. Even though the relative strength of the urban has grown over the decades,

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the absolute numbers of rural populations has not declined. So is the case with the number of rural settlements.<sup>1</sup>

However, even as the rural flourishes demographically and spatially, its social and economic organisation has seen many interesting and important changes over the past five or six decades. Perhaps the most important of these has been the steady decline of agriculture. Agriculture has declined in terms of its contribution to the national income, from more than half at the time of independence, to just around one-seventh today. Agriculture has also lost its charm in terms of its desirability as an occupation for younger generations across caste communities and regions of the country. Even when it presumably engages a majority of rural workers, it does not encompass the rural economy. A larger proportion of even rural incomes come from a variety of non-farm occupations.

Demographics are critical in democracies. The rural continues to matter, politically as well as socially, even though the larger balance of the Indian economy has seen some major shifts. It remains an important sphere of policy and political engagement with the Indian state and its political actors. However, the contemporary rural also presents empirical puzzles and conceptual challenges. Growing instances of farmers' suicides are not simply a reflection of declining incomes and rising indebtedness among the cultivators. They are also a reflection of a complex social change and a rapid disintegration of

local communities and social networks. Caste, land and economic disparities continue to matter but they can no longer be understood in the framework of *jajmani* relations, as the textbook view of village social and economic life would suggest. The Indian village today is also witness to an aspirational revolution, and the desire to move out of agriculture is likely to grow as the pace of its integration into the regional, the national, and the global grows.

However, the ground realities and the changing position of the rural in the larger social and economic life of the country cannot be captured through simple formulations such as Bharat versus India; the narratives of "crises" or even the new formulation of rurbanity. Ground realities of the rural today are not only complex but also extremely diverse, vertically as well as horizontally. The experience of the rural and its changing dynamics vary across caste, class and gender. It also varies significantly across regions of the country. It is in this context a revisit of the Indian village acquires critical significance. The papers presented in this issue of the Review of Rural Affairs, most of which are based on restudies of the villages that were studied by social anthropologists and economists in the 1950s, are not simply about documenting the unfolding of their evolutionary process of development. They also bring new perspectives of social science academy to the study of rural settlements, and also reflections on the enterprise of anthropology and fieldwork.

#### NOTE

- 1 For example, the size of the rural population of India in 2011 was nearly four times of what it was in 1901. Even more interestingly during the last decade, 2001–11, the number of urban centres in India went up from 5,161 to 7,935, largely because of the conversion of rural settlements into urban centres. However, during the same period the number of rural settlements has been growing consistently. Their numbers grew from 5,67,000 in 1901 to 6,38,588 in 2001, and further to 6,40,867 in 2011.

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