



BOOK REVIEW

Studying Village Society in India

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Of all emerging economies, India is the only one that continues to be predominantly rural, with more than two-thirds of its population living in more than half a million villages. Over the past two decades, faster growth has also brought about greater rural-urban disparities. There has been pervasive crisis in rural occupations – in occupations such as handloom weaving as much as in agriculture. The process of economic growth and the integration of the village into larger markets and political systems have also brought about greater mobilisation and self-assertion among oppressed social groups, resulting in changes in rural power structures. Ironically, it has been in this period that priorities in social science research have shifted away from the agrarian question and rural transformation. The present volume on rural society, which carries a selection of essays published over the past four decades in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, is thus a welcome stimulus for us to reflect on the nature of research that has been done – and can be done – on rural society.

The volume contains a selection of sixteen essays on four broad themes: methods and perspectives; social and cultural life; social, economic, and political processes; and perspectives on change. These essays are preceded by a comprehensive introduction that traces the origins of the sub-discipline of rural sociology, and also provides a brief but succinct overview of village studies and the phases of rural transformation in India.

The first essay, by M. N. Srinivas (1975) on methodology and perspectives on village society, was written almost four decades ago, yet is of abiding interest to social scientists of all kinds and of different times. The thrust of the argument here is on the importance of fieldwork in the social sciences, and the art and craft of “participant observation” as a methodology. Srinivas begins by referring to the lack of a tradition of fieldwork in the social sciences, other than in social anthropology (or, to an extent,

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in sociology), and the consequent damage done. Lack of fieldwork affected the growth and development of the social sciences by alienating them from grassroots reality, which in turn resulted in woeful ignorance about the complex interrelations between economic, political, and social forces at local levels. According to Srinivas, the reason for the lack of a fieldwork tradition was the implicit assumption that people are like dough in the hands of planners and governments, and the illusion that, through “social engineering,” “directed social change,” and the like, governments could change the lives of the people.

Srinivas refers to participant observation as a great asset and a highly productive methodological aid, particularly in the study of culture and social life. He shows the relevance of participant observation as a method even for those interested in regional, state, or national studies. It can serve as a system of apprenticeship, can help in interpreting other data on social institutions, and can be a crucial aid to intellectual development. Participant observation need not be only for small communities. Srinivas has words of caution for social scientists with regard to participant observation, which requires empathy with as well as sensitivity towards the people being studied. At the same time, a scholar needs to retain a certain emotional and intellectual distance, and not become heady with the idea that one understands everything. Srinivas observes that, although it is absurd to generalise in the context of the bewildering diversity that characterises rural India, there are certain regional and even national similarities, and village studies can be productive in terms of knowledge and insights that can be translated into hypotheses, and provide leads to future research. Just as the village has never been an isolated unit but has always been connected, micro–macro linkages are best revealed through leads from macro–correlations to in-depth micro-studies, and by systematically testing hypotheses and questions from micro-studies over wider regions.

The other contribution on methodology, by Andre Beteille (1972), focuses on constraints to fieldwork, and explains how these very constraints can serve as a source of insights into society and culture. The article provides a graphic account of the tribulations involved in participant observation when living in a highly stratified village.

The third essay, by Surinder S. Jodhka (2002), refers to an altogether different genre in methodology, that is, looking through the eyes of leaders of political and social transformations, and at their perceptions of village India. The author believes that although, in the nationalist imagination, the village was central to the traditional social order of India, there were wide variations among leaders in the perception of the village. The images of village India as perceived by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar have been analysed. The perceptions of Gandhi, a known ideologue of the Indian village, are traced from his South African years. However, since his substantive and better-known writings date from after his return to India, the focus is on his later years. Gandhi considered the village as a site of authenticity, of the

“real” or “pure” India, uncorrupted by Western influence. With his arrival on the scene of the freedom movement, the image of a free India emulating colonial city life was turned upside down. In Gandhi’s perception, the new nation had to be founded in its villages, where the majority of its people lived. Even after achieving freedom from the British rule, real *swaraj* would involve restoring the autonomy and self-sufficiency of villages and village communities by getting rid of the changes brought about by colonial rule in village life. Gandhi was concerned, however, about the practice of untouchability, and the filth and lack of cleanliness in India’s villages.

By contrast, Nehru never identified with the idea of the village as the site of future transformation. He considered the notion of “village republics” as characterised by various ills. He was critical of caste hierarchies and saw no virtue in reviving the traditional social order. He was sceptical of the Indian village becoming economically self-sufficient.

Unlike Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar had first-hand experience of village life as a Dalit child. To those who wished to perceive the village as representative of Indian civilisation, Ambedkar offered a radical critique of the Indian village. He characterised village republics as being nowhere near democratic, but as being the ruination of India. To him, the village is a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism – marked by exclusion, exploitation, and untouchability.

The second section of the volume, on social and cultural life, contains six essays. The first of these, by G. K. Lieten (1996), deals with the issue of religion in politics, and is based on extensive fieldwork in one district of Uttar Pradesh. It discusses two critical questions: Does Hindutva reflect inter-class homogeneity or upper-class design? Is India secular in the perception of the people? The conclusions are categorical. Hindutva, for most of the people in the surveyed villages, was an alien concept. Their concern was with more concrete issues. The respondents did show, to an extent, political preferences based on caste, but not on the basis of religion. Among the upper-caste and upper-class sections, which constituted about one-eighth of the rural population, only about one-third dwelt on Hindu–Muslim division, while the poor were not concerned with such ideas. Most of the people in the surveyed villages held views diametrically opposed to those of the Sangh Parivar; for them, India was still a secular nation and secularism (translated as religious tolerance) continued to be of value. Their perception was that the socio-economic elite misused religion for political purposes.

The essay on modernisation, occupational mobility, and rural stratification by K. L. Sharma (1970) is based on fieldwork in Rajasthan in 1965–66, that is, in the early post-Independence phase, when substantive changes were not yet in evidence. The author observes that occupational diversification depended on structural and cultural factors, and in terms of both, the upper castes were in an advantageous

position. They had a near monopoly of jobs with high incomes, prestige, and power. The author concludes that modernisation is not a universalist phenomenon in India and it does not necessarily weaken traditional institutions like caste. “Particularistic” modernisation strengthened traditionally privileged and elite groups, and weakened the position of the expropriated.

Mukul Sharma (1999) documents the extensive struggles of the Musahars in north Bihar, struggles that created fissures in the caste, gender, and ritual hierarchies of the region. Mobilisation among Musahars sought to disrupt a privileged social order and create a new one, but that objective remains an aspiration and is yet to be achieved. G. K. Karanth (1987) studies the impact of new technology on traditional rural institutions. New technology here is represented by a shift in the economy of a Karnataka village from predominantly grain production to sericulture. The impact of the new technology on the traditional institution of *jajmani* (here *adade*) is analysed. Karanth finds that institution of *adade* adapted itself to suit the changing needs of the people.

Partap C. Aggarwal (1969) examines the phenomena of sankritisation and westernisation in post-Independence India with specific reference to certain rural communities in Rajasthan. In the pre-Independence era it was rare for the under-privileged to aspire for better social status through imitation of the customs of the rich, largely because of unequal distribution of economic and political power among various castes, and the ability of the privileged castes to curb the ambition of the lower castes. In the post-Independence years, distribution of land and provision of access to education enabled the castes that were previously deprived of economic and political power to emulate the religious and social practices of the higher castes, as a way to assert their changed social status.

As a part of this section, there is an interesting essay by Jishnu Das (2000), on the institutional arrangements for the management of common property resources in a traditional society. The author analyses the relationship between community and commons in a Garhwal village. He calls into question the conservationist view of management practices relating to the commons in the region. He warns that restricting attention to historical institutions without analysing the economic environment may lead to wrong conclusions. His findings show that the institution that is thought to be a resource-conserving mechanism has a parallel dimension in terms of a labour-conserving role.

The third section of the book contains four essays on social, economic, and political processes. Two of these are on gender-related issues, and the other two are on the mobilisation and assertion of Dalits and Other Backward Classes. The essay on “dung-work” by Roger Jeffery, Patricia Jeffery and Andrew Lyon highlights how an economic activity can remain invisible because it is viewed as lowly and performed by women. It points out that economists do not pay attention to the task of

transforming cow-dung into economically valued products because the task is done by women at home, in “private space.” In a male-dominated view of agriculture, fuel dung-cakes are dismissed as inappropriate; in discussions of fertilizers, transforming dung into manure is ignored; and in discussions of women’s work, dung-work does not get attention at all. The essay, based on fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh villages, points to the various uses of dung – as a plaster, as cooking fuel, as midden manure – all of which have economic value. The authors also provide estimates of the economic value of dung, which is not insubstantial. They point out that dung-work straddles public and private domains.

The essay by Leela Gulati (1987) discusses the impact of male-specific migration on women in Kerala. Through a series of case studies of women of different circumstances living in households from which males migrate, the author analyses the contribution made by women both in terms of participation in preparing for migration and coping with it. The findings show that women undertake wide-ranging responsibilities, from mobilising resources to fund the migration to the management of repayment of loans, investments, child care and education, health, and other responsibilities in running the household.

The essay by Sudha Pai and Jaspal Singh (1997) is on the contrasting experience of political mobilisation of Dalits and Most Backward Castes (MBCs) in four villages in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. There has been politicisation of the Dalits through mobilisation by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) as part of the socio-cultural process of Ambedkarisation. This process is marked by the emergence of politically conscious, young Dalit (Jatav) intellectuals who question the existing unequal social order. They are employed in new urban occupations, are exposed to the media, and are aware of their rights. By contrast, people of the Most Backward Castes (MBC), such as the Gadarias and Jogis, are yet to assume a distinct and collective identity, and do not yet have a forum of their own for the articulation of specific needs. At the same time, the upwardly mobile MBCs are opposed to the rising political power of the Dalits and come into direct conflict with them. Thus the political conflict is not so much between the upper castes and the Dalits, but within the relatively underprivileged Dalits and MBCs. These conflicts and mobilisations have brought about a change in power equations and an erosion of the power of the dominant castes.

Anil Kumar Vaddiraju’s essay (1999), based on a study in southern Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, tells the story of how the persistence of backwardness undermined the erstwhile feudal authority, who had to give place to more productive and hard-working sections of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The author provides a graphic account of how low productivity and backwardness in agriculture, lack of infrastructural development, the partition of large holdings, and the overwhelming burden of unproductive social expenditure, including on marriages that involve huge dowries, resulted in the economic, social, and political decline of landlord families. Selling land to the OBCs to meet growing expenditure by the landlord families, and

the establishment of the era of panchayat elections with reservations for women and specific social groups marked the decline of upper-caste political power. The political rise of the OBCs was aided by certain fortuitous economic gains due to a rise in the demand for handloom exports in the 1980s. Most Other Backward Class master-weavers who benefited from this windfall bought land from the erstwhile landlords and emerged as dominant political leaders.

The last section of the book deals with perspectives on change. The three papers included here offer three different perspectives of change: one is an ecological perspective that stresses the importance of common property resources for the livelihood of the rural poor; the second is a historical perspective on the *longue durée* of the dynamics of rural transformation; and the third is a very pessimistic account of the future of the village. To begin with the last, Dipankar Gupta (2005) focuses on the pervasive crisis in agriculture, which is causing great turbulence in the lives of the people in Indian villages. Socially, the villages have undergone considerable change in the power structure, particularly as a result of political assertion by Other Backward Classes and Dalits. Even as one witnesses a decline of the caste system, there has been a rise in the consciousness of caste and caste identities. There has not been much increase in productive and remunerative rural non-farm employment, and agriculture has become an economic residue that generously accommodates non-achievers who are resigned to a life of “sad satisfaction.” The conclusion sounds like a clock that is ticking to erase the village from the map of India: “The village is as bloodless as the rural economy is lifeless. From rich to poor, the trend is to leave the village, and, if that entails going abroad, then so be it.”

In a re-study of one of the famous “Slater villages,” Iruvelpattu in Tamil Nadu, John Harriss, J. Jeyaranjan, and K. Nagaraj (2010) bring out the dynamics of rural transformation over the twentieth century. There has been a decline in the proportion of cultivator and agricultural labour households. Agriculture has increasingly been mechanised, as shown by the large number of irrigation pump-sets, tractors, power tillers, and combined harvesters in the village (which is no longer an agricultural village). Non-farm employment accounts for 40 per cent of all employment. There has been a decline in Dalit dependence on agriculture. Fifty per cent of Dalit workers are in agriculture, and Dalits constitute one-third of all non-farm households. There has been a kind of social revolution, breaking chains of servitude in agriculture. Dalits now have their own house sites, are less dependent on the grace or favours of caste Hindus, and have better access to education. The tightening of the rural labour market, the rise in real agricultural wages beyond the historical ceiling, and the formation of “Ambedkar Sangams” have given Dalits the confidence to assert themselves, and to demand better facilities with respect to drinking water, schools, and housing. In addition, the role of the State in providing health care, access to the public distribution system, schools with teachers, and opportunities for work (as under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), helps make the transformation real, even if not complete.

The last essay, on the importance of common property resources (CPRs) for the poor (Jodha 1986), is like a prick to the conscience of social scientists, for these resources have long been neglected, almost to the point of their vanishing from the countryside. Jodha shows that if the state remembered these resources at all, it was only to transfer them in the form of private assignments. Such assignments did further damage to the poor, since the resources in question are too fragile for any profitable private exploitation. The tragedy of the commons is thus a continuing story.

While the volume serves the purpose of reminding social scientists of the range of issues crying out for in-depth study, it succeeds in providing only a sample of some of the dimensions of change in village society. It is widely agreed that rural studies no longer carry the enchantment that they once did. The question is how to re-enchant scholars with respect to village studies. At a time when there is a growing inclination towards rethinking the social sciences, or rethinking development and capitalism, can one hope that a little more attention be paid to the following words of wisdom?

[The] social sciences are drawing too heavily on a small range of human experience, viz. the western-industrial, and equating it with the global. (Built into that equation is an ethno-centric assumption on the part of many westerners that all societies are travelling towards the ultimate goal of a western-industrial type of society.) Indian social scientists have a responsibility to resist such an equation, firstly, in order to better understand their society, and secondly, to contribute to the greater universalisation of their disciplines. (M. N. Srinivas, p. 28, this volume)

Fulfilling that responsibility calls for more attention to field-based studies, and, in particular, more field-based studies about rural transformation.