

# **Understanding Ruralities: Contemporary Debates**

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CAS WORKING PAPER SERIES  
Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

January 2014  
CAS/WP/14-1



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## Abstract

Amidst the growing scholarly pronouncements on the declining sociological significance of the village and the village studies, and the equally enticing postcolonial theoretical concerns about the de-spatialised cultural flows and diasporic hybridity, this paper makes a plea for a possible renewal of village studies. Although the village was hardly a container par excellence of the larger processes of rural/agrarian social change, it anchored much of Indian sociology as the real or perceived ontological entity without necessarily being an explanandum in sociological research. Obviously, the village is no longer the convenient methodological site for ethnographic fieldwork in the old ways thanks to the thickening and deepening of the state apparatuses in our times, and the attendant processes of migration and mobility. It is time we grafted new theoretical and methodological concerns onto existing preoccupations. To understand ruralities today we need new sites and modes of enquiry. We may be required to erect tents on railway platforms to understand the village and the villager than staying with the old village headman. To comprehend the village dynamics, we need to make many more visits to panchayat, taluka and district headquarters, and the local Thana, than we have been conventionally used to. Thus, tracking the trail of the villagers will definitely mean the demise of

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single-village studies, and recourse to methodological repertoire of multi-sited fieldwork and political ethnography.

## **Introduction: The Village and Its Avatars**

It is part of received wisdom that the idea of village as the hallmark of Indian society is an outcome of colonial 'investigative modalities' (Cohn 1997). Interestingly, the Indian village not only occupied a pride of place in colonial social morphology, but also became enmeshed in the leading theoretical and historiographical debates of the day. Henry Sumner Maine, Karl Marx and B. H. Baden-Powell could look at the Indian village more as a unit of knowledge about Indian society than a mere unit of colonial administration. Not surprisingly, the Indian village became the theoretical site where conceptual knots of some of the grandest evolutionary schema of the nineteenth century were sought to be resolved. It does not require much of a conceptual history to argue that the idea of the village (rurality) in India has a specific ideological character in terms of its colonial origins. By the nineteenth century, this idea had become pregnant with many meanings - an archaic and primary nucleus of Indian society, an autonomous politico-administrative unit, an economically self-sufficient entity. Subsistence agriculture, low technology crafts and services, timelessness of lifestyles, and immobility of people accompanied by their ideological integration to land were added to an essentialised set of aforementioned attributes of the Indian village (Breman 1997: 16).

These attributes bestowed on the village by the colonisers came to inform the nationalist thinking on the subject as well. The demands of a national identity necessitated the projection of the village as the repository of civilizational ideals of the Indian nation. Long after the British relegated the Indian village to the backseat in favour of caste as a category for understanding Indian society, the notion of self-sufficient village republic continued to stir the nationalist imagination. Once the village became an emblem of the nationalist movement, there was no stopping the ritual incantation of the great virtues of the village (Dumont 1970). The true India now lived in its villages. The village became the epitome of India's 'golden past' with its suggestions of egalitarianism (overt or covert), primitive democracy and pristine harmony.

In ideological terms, the village, with all its inflated virtues, provided a counterfoil to the much-criticised hierarchic and undemocratic notions of caste. It provided the nationalists with a sturdy confidence in their inherited legacy of a 'nation' and thus served a vital ideological function in course of the nationalist movement.

The nationalist interest in the village, in conjunction with certain theoretical and methodological changes in the discipline of anthropology, inaugurated an era of what subsequently came to be characterised as 'village studies' in Indian sociology/social anthropology. Drawing inspiration from the spate of community studies in the United States of America (USA) in the 1930s and the 1940s, the Indian sociologists/social anthropologists entered the village in a big way. The study of village gained immense popularity also because it was looked at as a 'natural junction' of both caste and the facts of peasant life. Indeed, the village became a superb methodological site where these two different orders of fact could be gainfully studied. Although most of the village studies 'seem in the main to reflect the dominant concern with caste rather than furthering our understanding of Indian peasant society' (Heesterman 1985: 181), the flood of village monographs continued unabated for some time, and turned out to be the defining feature of Indian sociology/social anthropology.

The post-Independence period witnessed the projection of the village as a template for nation building. The village was to be the laboratory of 'directed cultural change' (Dube 1964). A large number of policy decisions and the massive rural development programmes directed the post-colonial state's attention towards the village. The village gained in political salience even when it continued to be the ultimate destination of the sociologist's/social anthropologist's quest for a suitable locale for the study of 'peasant society and culture' (Redfield 1955). Those very virtues that had recommended the village to the nationalists now became the sure signs of its backwardness and stagnation. The supposedly unchanging stability of the village called for external impetus for change in the form of state-led rural development. To be sure, the discourse on rural development, that is, the 'village developmentalised', encompasses the overlapping moments of 'the village colonised', 'the village nationalised', and 'the village anthropologised' (see Breman 1997: 15-75). After all, it was the modern state in which almost everybody - colonial administrators, social reformers, nationalist politicians, and the

post-Independence modernisers - had reposed their faith as the apparatus of change and development. Arguably, no understanding of the village today can afford to ignore the definitive overlay of the modern official (statist) view of the village (see also Heesterman 1985: 183-87).

## The Declining Significance of the Village

This centrality of the village as one of the earliest preoccupations of sociologists/social anthropologists in India sits uneasily with contemporary scholarship with the latter's pronouncements on the decline in the sociological significance of the village and the village studies. For example, Gupta (2004: 11) avers, 'the village is no longer a site where futures can be planned'. He adds further, 'the village is shrinking as a sociological reality, though it still exists as space' (*Ibid.*: 9). He discerns the declining importance of the village in India's national culture as also in contemporary political debates in the country which do not have a rural character at all: 'though the majority of Indians live in villages, the village leaves little impress upon the national culture today' (*Ibid.*: 20). Moreover, in the 1990s, at the level of filmic and urban-nostalgic representation, this general disenchantment with the village manifests itself in the near total absence of films glorifying village at the expense of the city.

Likewise, Jonathan Parry's ethnographic evidence in relation to the long-distance migrant labourers working in the public sector Bhilai Steel Plant too lends credence to Gupta's characterisation of the village. Parry brings to our attention the increasing spread of 'a vision of modernity which antithetically constructs the village as an area of darkness - a "waiting room" from which one hopes to escape' (2004: 217). For his informants, the village has come to stand for the antithesis to Bhilai as a beacon of progress. Whereas Bhilai symbolises ideological incentives of industrial modernism, the village merely evokes 'some flickering nostalgia for supposedly rural virtues (pure ghee, dutiful daughters, unlocked doors and so forth)'. Interestingly, the village is not a simple morphological other of Bhilai. Instead, the village is despised 'less because of its lack of electricity (and other modern amenities) than because of its abstract moralised qualities of "backwardness", "bigotry", "illiteracy", and lack of "civilisation"' (*Ibid.*: 221). For the children

and grandchildren of Parry's migrant workers, agriculture (and, by implication, village) is emblematic of the rustic world of their thumb-impression (*angutha-chaap*) elders. At any rate, *unparh gvar* (illiterate yokel) is not a worthy role model for them.

From a different theoretical and ideological vantage point, Nandy (2001) too notes the decline of the village in the creative imagination of Indians in the recent decades. For Nandy, a radical rejection of the village is to be seen as the triumph of the colonial city as India's new self, thus, rendering village, as that part of one's self that had outlived its utility. The colonial city is 'the new self, identified with history, progress, becoming' (*Ibid.*: 13). In his reading, the village is no longer a village-in-itself but a counterpoint to the city - a fantasy village for the city. The village has turned out to be more of a dystopia. At any rate, the village is no longer a living presence in mainstream Indian intellectual life, and is gradually taking on the form of a demographic or statistical datum. Much like Gupta and Parry, for Nandy as well, the vivacity of an Indian village is not part of the various visions of future floating around in South Asia.

Yet, there are scholars whose faith in the inherent worth of the village studies is too entrenched to be shaken so easily. For example, the economist Barbara Harriss-White (2004: xxii) writes, 'village studies are far too important to our understanding of economy and society to have atrophied in the way they seem to have done over the last decade'. Similarly, in a recent edited collection 'Village Matters', Diane P. Mines and Nicolas Yazgi (2010: 3) proclaim

Villages are desperately lost objects in anthropology of India. Due to a history of ideas beginning with Dumont but continuing through contemporary theoretical concerns that emphasise the deterritorialisation that accompanies broader cultural flows, it has become tantamount to taboo to write about villages as such even though the vast majority of India's population still has powerful links to villages, either as their primary locus of action, or through more widely embedded nexuses of practices and representations.

Though they make a plea for a possible renewal of the village studies, they do not consider villages to be ontologically bounded entities any longer. They are aware that villages are not merely physical settlements populated by a given number of inhabitants and/or places of belonging for those who live there.

They reiterate the need to go beyond the realm of the 'real' and the 'factual' of the conventional village studies. They sensitise us to various theoretical preconceptions framing the ways we have historically approached the Indian village. Such preconceptions, though implicit, often go unacknowledged (Niranjana 1991: 373). Not surprisingly, a considerable body of the village studies is silent on the discursive character of the village. To quote Niranjana:

It must be re-emphasised that the 'village' is not just a domain of study, but also the outcome of sociological discourse. This recognition demands an examination of the village as a discursive space which constitutes the meeting ground of political/administrative strategies, while serving to contest several socio-cultural representations of Indian society. Most studies of the village community have adhered to the norms of scientific discourse in sociology, that is, the fact of the existence of the social world has not been queried. Even those who claim that the village in itself is not as important as the processes, for which the village is a site, assume the objective status of the village (*Ibid.*: 377).

Expectedly, the village is seen to be a viable analytic construct with an empirical referent in reality by most sociologists/anthropologists. It has seldom been treated as an explanandum in sociological research. A reading of sociological literature on the village suggests the assumption that the discipline should engage itself primarily with processes of rural-agrarian social change of which the village is the container *par excellence*. True, given the multi-dimensionality of the concept 'village', there is no general consensus on the exact number of dimensions and the accompanying context of each. However, the notion of the village generally encompasses ecological, occupational, and socio-cultural dimensions. In terms of the occupational dimension the village refers to a population aggregate that derive its livelihood from agricultural and allied activities. The ecological connotes a human collectivity inhabiting a delimited geographical area characterised by smallness and relative isolation from the city. The socio-cultural dimension refers to a property space whereby the village becomes a proxy for provincial, socially conservative, slow changing, traditional and somewhat fatalistic values and ethos. Indeed, these are the well-established co-ordinates for defining the village in sociology textbooks.

Even otherwise, at a time when the general disenchantment with the village life appears to be the spirit of the new India, the sustenance of a methodological tradition based on the analytic primacy of the village poses serious

intellectual challenge. Contrary to the earlier imagination of the village as the nation incarnate, it is an area of darkness - full of despair, indignation, filth, and squalor, and mindless violence. Our intelligentsia invoke the idea of the village only in times of crises, be it farmers' suicide or the fatwa issued by various *khap* panchayats. It turns out to be the very antithesis to the ideals of development and progress. It is a regrettable fetter on our collective leap towards industrial modernism. Be that as it may, as Robert Merton (1968: 162-71) notes so presciently, changes in the empirical context in terms of new data or refinements of observations occasion the elaboration of new conceptual and methodological schema. It would be foolhardy to claim that the village studies tradition can go ahead with business as usual without factoring in the substantial alteration of the empirical and conceptual universe of the Indian village. In what follows we highlight what we consider to be one of the major sources of this reconfiguration of village India, and the associated conceptualisation of rurality.

## The New Context

We argue that rural development discourse<sup>1</sup>, while entailing a hegemonic version of the village, reconfigures the meanings of village in our social imagination. Irrespective of whether rural development programmes fall short of accomplishing their goals, or succeed in meeting the desired targets, they lead to a certain transformation of the terms in which village is talked about. Village becomes a marker of social difference in the overall context of development and modernisation. It is employed as a term of social classification with connotations of the presence, absence or degrees of development. Yet, rural development is the medium in which village is placed in relation to national development. In this sense, the theories and practices of rural development alter conceptualisations of village for the villagers as well. Simultaneously,

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<sup>1</sup> By discourse we mean the aggregate of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena, that ensemble of speech acts, utterances, interactions and practices that together constitute a shared arena of public conduct for a collectivity of people. Discourse helps frame issues/problems by highlighting some aspects of a situation rather than others. We have used 'discourse' in the vein of an intellectual framework referring to theory and practice, an interwoven set of languages and practices.

the pre-eminence of state results in the gradual loss of the defining characteristics of the village as a moral and social universe. As the state sets eligibility criteria and qualifying attributes for inclusion and exclusion vis-à-vis public resources, utilities and services in the context of rural development, village prefers being seen as the village in the eyes of the state. As a consequence, the statist construction of the village seems to dominate other possible frames of its conceptualisation and understanding. More often than not, village in contemporary times turns out to be a 'governmentalised locality'.

Rural development programmes<sup>2</sup> are, generally accompanied by a certain conceptualisation of the village. While conceiving, devising, promoting and administering such programmes the state necessarily relies on a set of images of the village and the village life. Very often, though, these images of the village coalesce into a typical, generic village, turning all the villages into *the* village for the purpose of rural development. In other words, the village crystallises into a distinct social category in the context of the statist project of rural development. It is this conceptual joining of the village and development through the mediation of the agency of state (and its outcome in terms of contemporary representations of the village) that seems to have largely escaped the attention of sociologists and anthropologists in India. Obviously, this acknowledgement of the altered context in which the village and the state are mutually embedded in a historically transformative relationship has definite implications for the reorientation of the village studies tradition.

By contrast, the academic discussions have disproportionately focused on questions such as the community character of the village, its political autonomy and economic self-sufficiency. These issues, though hardly settled, have been the stuff of much of the sociological/social anthropological writings on the village. What is somehow missing in these conventional accounts is an exploration of the nexus between sociological representation of the village and the policymaking exercise in the context of rural development. While appreciating the enormous significance of development as a state-directed process of change, and noting the impact of planned intervention and social reconstruction on the village in substantive terms, sociologists and social

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<sup>2</sup> By 'rural development programmes' we refer to interventions guided, or more usually, implemented by the state (or by aid agencies though routed through the state agencies). In the Indian context, such interventions generally include policies and attempts made for alleviating the socio-economic conditions of the poor in the villages or developing backward areas.

anthropologists, in general, did not explore the implications of rural development in relation to the idea of the village in conceptual and historical terms. Put differently, they either engaged in village studies and/or rural development studies. The proposition that the practices of rural development might shape a particular idea of the village does not seem to have exercised their scholarly mind. The methodological task, instead, is to explore ways in which the discourse on rural development constitutes a hegemonic version of village in India. We put forward the argument that rural development discourse recreates the Indian village. Admittedly, we tend to focus more on one particular aspect of the state-village dynamics, that is, how rural development programmes process the village. Though alive to the fact that the village also impacts on the state we have particularly tried to privilege the statist view of village in the context of rural development.

Perhaps, village is not merely an ontological category reflecting the morphology of a society where the vast majority of the people are villagers. Speaking of village in the context of rural development rarely refers to the actual villages. An implicit opposition between village and development informs rural development discourse: village is something that is characterised by the absence of development. It is simply a backward place by virtue of its being at a remote distance from development. This is precisely why it eminently qualifies to be the recipient of the rural development programmes. In other words, the acceleration of rural development programmes has reconfigured the images of village over time. The association of village with development leads to a definite alteration in the earlier ways of conceptualising what a village is.<sup>3</sup> Village as a kind of place (underdeveloped/undeveloped) comes to stand for a kind of people – the villager (backward). The very phrase rural development suggests that villages are in need of development towards some ideal that they have fallen short of attaining.

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<sup>3</sup> There could be numerous ways of conceptualising the village apart from the census and other administrative definitions that privilege demographic, ecological and occupational factors. Studies of the ways in which socially mobile segments of the population relate to the villages they have already left, studies of the urban elite's images of the villages they have perhaps never seen, and the studies of the rural and pastoral imagery in literature, film and other visual media have hardly been conducted in India (for a recent exception see Nandy 2001). Such studies would show dimensions of the images of the village other than those discussed in this paper.

Rural development policies have made an enormous and decisive impact on the course of social transformation in the Indian village during the past half a century or so. The village landscape is dotted with agencies of the state. In a way, rural development discourse encourages the formation of a unified, monolithic village India crying for policy inputs from the state. The *village* of rural development, while transcending the differences of language, region, caste and ethnicity, marks off a common terrain to be developed under the benign guidance of development functionaries. What characterises *village* is the common condition of underdevelopment at which development interventions are aimed. This characterisation of a social territory in exclusive terms of underdevelopment has significant outcomes.

For example, even in popular common sense discourse, development becomes the idiom through which the relationship between the village and state is articulated. This leads to the incorporation of village into state and the associated conversion of villagers into citizens irrespective of the anticipated outcomes of the rural development programmes (Weber 1979, Ferguson 1990). Along with this a temporal hierarchisation of the village takes place. Since villages are underdeveloped, they remain in the past or, at best, an inadequate present, while other places (non-villages) have already become part of the future by virtue of their being developed. As Gupta (2004: 7) rightly remarks, 'while there is the acknowledgement that rural India is changing in factual terms, yet at the conceptual level village and villagers remain resolutely in the past'. In this sense, the category of the *villager* functions in the same way as the category of *the native* in anthropology (Cf. Fabian 1983). By being placed backward in time, the village typifies a particular social form and the villagers stand for a particular set of beliefs and values. Place and person fuse in the delineation of the essence of the village, as the village is made to stand for a kind of culture-territory in relation to development.

Even as rural development aims to make development an integral part of the village, it also creates a dichotomy between village and development. Development is concentrated in other places, while villages are places of little or no development. In this perspective, the village emerges in counter-distinction to development even though it is the prime target of development. As a consequence, rural development, while intending to bring development to the village, conceptually segregates it as a social world distinct and distant from development. For the practitioners of rural development,

development is the solution and village is the problem. Seen in these terms, while villages are the objects of development and the villagers its recipients, they are also obstacles to national development. This conceptual opposition of village and development, upon which much of rural development programmes is based, thus, leads to a paradox: rural development locates village on the periphery of development, yet, its ostensible aim is to make villages developed (see Pigg 1992).

This is not to say that the village does not contest and redefine the state: 'the state is not only present in the village but the village also penetrates into the state' (Breman 1997: 59). That is, the dynamics between the state and the village is not unidirectional. As recent scholarship on development (see Pigg 1992; Woost 1993; Tsing 1999; Moore 2000) has shown, it is not merely the supra-local sphere such as the state that acts on the village, but the village does appropriate the state in its own image. Moreover, the village does not seem as opaque and fixed to its inhabitants as it appears to the policy makers and planners manning the institutions of rural development. However, how the abstracted social map of the village, as carried by rural development functionaries, is reworked and appropriated by the villagers in the processes of the implementation of development programmes is not the focus of our discussion here.

Rural development discourse, thus, facilitates the spread of development vision of society as more and more people lay claims to it. At times, the ideologies of development come handy while segregating the village from the non-village. They also serve political interests and, at times, the polarised images of the village and city become the co-ordinates of political idiom as in *Bharat versus India* debate (Joshi 1985, 1988). The ways of imagining social difference get associated with political uses of identity as underdeveloped or undeveloped. Indeed, rural development becomes the medium in which the villages also start expressing their location vis-à-vis the historical trajectory of national development. Thus, an un(under)developed village ('an infantilised village' *a la* Nandy 2001: 134) waits to pass its developmental milestones to join the ranks of developed villages.

These propositions assume salience as the studies of *Village India* have been intimately tied to the developmental aspirations of the Indian state. Undoubtedly, the village studies constituted the primary interface between the professionally trained sociologists and the demands of the project of national development. The histories of the development and growth of Indian sociology unambiguously point out the close connections between the expansion of the

discipline and the expectations placed on it by the state (Singh 1986). One wonders if the village studies tradition had acquired the prominence it did in Indian sociology without the attendant expectations generated as part of the state-led enterprise of rural development. Indeed, the empirically grounded village studies helped establish credentials and claims of Indian sociology as policy relevant and thus capable of contributing to the task of national development. Not surprisingly, sociologists invested heavily in understanding 'India's Changing Villages' in the overall context of rural developmental policies and the practices of social engineering. Nonetheless, they did not forcefully drive home the central point that rural development has not merely been a medium in which the discourses and practices of development are conveyed to villagers, but has also significantly shaped the way in which inhabitants of a particular settlement conceive of themselves as belonging to a village.

If 'umbilical ties to one's birthplace would seem to be less constraining, and "primordial" commitments and ancestral culture more malleable to the interventions of the state' in an era of industrial modernism (Parry 2004: 247), the village may gainfully be seen to have been constituted as a category through specific discourses and practices of the state (rural development in the post-colonial context). Theoretically speaking, then, the village, rather than being a pre-given social entity, becomes enmeshed with the act of naming or categorizing initiated by the state. By its very nature, such classification is always political. This underlines the need to pay scholarly attention to the village not merely as a binary sociological description (as in rural-urban) but also to the ideological and political work that it does. The category of the village could very well be deployed as strategic representations in policy debates with definite aims towards advocating rights and mobilizing opinion.

More importantly, rural development offers a contested site for the negotiation of identity on the part of the village. No wonder, villagers increasingly tend to define themselves in and through the terms that objectify them in the form of discourses of rural development. Increasingly, it is the uncanny presence of the state in the life of the village that distinguishes the thickening nexus between the state and the village. It seems as if the village derived its own existence from a particular reading of the state. Arguably, the state<sup>4</sup> can be seen

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<sup>4</sup> Much of the literature in this tradition focuses primarily on the colonial state. However, Kaviraj (1992) finds this construction inherent in the very nature of modernity. So, for him, any modern state has a role to play in the constitution of substantialised and essentialised communities.

as constituting *essentialised* communities. In the long run, these communities become actors in the political arena in their own right and thus further reinforce and perpetuate their received identity. The point is not whether the identities thus ascribed or achieved are false or unreal. The significance lies in the fact that people are persuaded, coerced, tempted and mobilised on the basis of such constructed identities. Sociologists ought to explore as to how the identity called 'rural' has undergone shifts in its inflections. Suffice it say that one's identity as the rural, or from the village, is also a tool for making claims on the resources of the modern state and a way of negotiating with it. In other words, the discursive constitution of social identities need not overlook the concrete political or economic structures within which such construction takes place (see also Harriss 2004: 147).

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the eminence that the village studies acquired in the discipline in the past, it has undergone a definite decline in contemporary times. Its routine entrenchment in the overall disciplinary field and its formulaic (and less rigorous) adherence by subsequent generation of scholars led to the waning of village studies tradition. Under the rubric of village studies, the major corpus of sociological/social anthropological research accorded disproportionate attention to everyday social organization and behaviour of those who dwell in villages, and hardly problematized the village as such. In tune with the institutionally crystallised methodological temper of the sociology profession, the representations of the village appear to have, for the large part, escaped the sociological gaze. For much of sociological research, the village remained a convenient setting for field work generating substantive discussions around caste, occupations, kinship, religion, landholding patterns and the like. Obviously, this one-sided and unproblematic treatment of the village as a locus of fieldwork could not accord deeper methodological consideration to the very idea of the village. Of late, though, even the most articulate proponents of 'field view' have come to realize that representations are as much part of social reality as lived experience. No society conducts its daily business without having a certain conception of the ideal. People do try to conform to the design of social life that they regard as worthy of their collective efforts (Béteille 2003: 60-61).

Evidently, there is a need to recalibrate the methodological co-ordinates of the conventional village studies tradition. Much of the existing methodological literature is rooted to the idea of the village as a socio-spatial unit - a mere fact of territory. Here, the village is part of the staple social morphological matrix in the sense of something that exists in opposition to the city and can be segregated along various axes such as demographic, ecological, and occupational. There is little appreciation of the representation of the village in the historical sense of something that is constructed and ideologically deployed. The latter not only helps us to examine the methodological limitations of the village studies tradition but also suggests the methodological promises of the new sites of fieldwork that transgress the village.

Such a transgression does not underplay the fact that the vast majority of India's population still has powerful links to villages (Jodhka 2012). It merely brings to the fore the new methodological premise that villages need not be considered to be ontologically bounded entities any longer. They are not merely physical settlements populated by a given number of inhabitants and/or places of belonging for those who live there. The new tradition of scholarship need to graft theoretical concerns like gender and ecology, migration and mobility, everyday state and state-making, the decline of peasant and farmer movements and populist mobilisations, the diasporic ambitions of the burgeoning middle classes, and the new cultures of consumption and the attendant recasting of ruralities under globalisation and liberalisation onto the existing preoccupations. It underlines the need to see the village as a viable analytic construct without necessarily having an empirical referent in the reality of a given village. Such an understanding of the village calls for new sites and modes of sociological enquiry. Social anthropologists may be required to erect tents on railway platforms to understand new ruralities than staying with the old village Pradhan. They will have to make frequent visits to taluka and district headquarters, and the local thana, to understand the village dynamics than they have been conventionally used to. May be, tracking the trail of the villagers – rich and poor – will mean the demise of single village studies and inaugurate the new methodological era of multi-sited ethnography. No study of village, howsoever insightful, can afford any longer to celebrate a fieldworker's continuous stay in a single village for the remainder of her life. Possibly, it is time the new generation of sociologists wrote methodological obituaries to Rampura and Shamirpet!

Thus, a new agenda for the 'Village Studies' can gainfully factor in the following possible trajectories for understanding contemporary ruralities (besides the one discussed in the preceding sections)<sup>5</sup>:

One could approach the village as an entry point to understand the history and character of colonial forms of knowledge by demonstrating as to how the exercise of power and the accumulation of knowledge were both parts of a larger colonial project. While locating the specific career of the term 'village' as part of the history of colonial knowledge about India and the use of that knowledge in official projects, colonialism itself may be revealed as being as much about policies as about theories and strategies of representation. In this sense, the historical anthropology of the colonial state gets tied up with that of the modern nation-state. Indeed, what Dirks calls 'the epistemological violence of the British rule' has left its imprint on the categories of contemporary thinking. Viewed thus, a critical delineation of the colonial construction of the village and its epistemological impact on ethnographic/anthropological research on the village, and demonstration as to how ethnography participated in an interlinked intellectual and institutional power/knowledge apparatus could be a possible line to follow.

Secondly, one could go for an exposition of the Indian nationalist appropriation of the idealised village, its historicity as well as its contemporary articulation. Thanks to the colonial construction of the 'immemorial' village community, even for Indian nationalists the village remained a compelling sign of 'traditional' India, which the colonial rule had sought to sustain for its own purposes. Eventually, Indian nationalists appropriated this idealised village, as they saw in these communities evidence for the antiquity of an indigenous concept of democracy, socialism, and much more that suited their ideological palate.

Thirdly, a possible way of approaching the village might lay in the revisiting of the hitherto existing assumption of an unproblematic equation between the village and the peasantry. To the extent that the agrarian character of the village is fast changing, one needs to problematise the village as the primary locus of a peasant society: does the village continue to be the site for

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<sup>5</sup> Partly based on ideas contained in Personal Communication (dated 9 August 2004) from Diane P. Mines, Appalachian State University (USA) and Nicolas Yazgi Neuchâtel University, Switzerland

Chayanovian ‘peasant family farm’ and the corner stone of the agricultural economy? It is not that the identity of the Indian village with a peasant community has not been debated in the past, but the issue has acquired a certain urgency given far-reaching developments owing to migration and the changes in the character of rural employment, namely, the high incidences of rural non-farm employment.

Lastly, one could undertake the more challenging task of unravelling current instances of appropriation/romanticisation/essentialisation in spheres that go beyond the nationalist label (though overlapping substantially with it, for example, in the writings of Dharampal<sup>6</sup>). Such conceptualisations are important as they are not merely in the realm of ideas but also have pragmatic impact in the way many voluntary organisations and NGOs work. They inform various forms of politics and voluntarism. Many environmental and alternative technology movements in India work with concepts of the village that bear an inverse relationship with the urban-industrial pathologies to which the Indian city is heir (Nandy 2001: 20). In their imagination, village represents some sort of serene and pastoral paradise offering a perfect community life. It is seen as ‘the depository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, and of the harmony of nature, intact community life and environmental sagacity – perhaps even a statement of Gandhian austerity, limits to want and anti-consumerism’ (*Ibid.*: 14). Here, village, as the ultimate prototype of Indian civilization, serves not merely as a critique of the city, but also as the anchor of traditional visions of a desirable way of life and the inexhaustible depot of pre-modern (nay, non-modern) environmental-cultural sensibility and people’s critique of urban-industrial development.

In the ultimate analysis, our studies have to reflect the changing political-cultural reality of the village and the attendant representational mutations of

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<sup>6</sup> For Dharampal, common ownership of land was the typical characteristic of an Indian village. *Sasana* villages around Puri and *Samudayam* villages in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu boasted of this till 1937 when it got dissolved because of the state’s intervention with ‘land to the tiller’ policy (nd: 8). According to him, ‘most of these systems [of land rights] seem to have assumed the supremacy of the village community over the land, its disposal, or the way it was worked’ (*Ibid.*: 26). Further, ‘... the Indian villager, was in no sense inferior to his counterpart in England, or other countries of the West, ... he perhaps was far superior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century peasant or craftsman of the West’ (*Ibid.*: 5). Indigeneity comes out as a great virtue in this line of thinking and even Indian nation-state gets seen as an overbearing monster built as it is on alien concepts and theories.

the idea of the village that we call ruralities. We have to highlight the denial of temporal co-evalness to the village in the context of rural development as well as its framing as the counter-city and an escape from the city amidst globalising discourses on environment. Also, we have to be alive to the creation of 'authentic' villages in the very heart of metropolitan India (see Tarlo 1996).

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