

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

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