Whither the Indian Village

Culture and Agriculture in 'Rural' India

The village in India, where life was once portrayed as 'unchanging' and 'idyllic', has in recent decades seen profound changes. The twin shackles that once decided matters for India's villagers, caste and agriculture, no longer exercise their vigorous hold. While a break in caste rigidities has fostered greater fluidity in occupational choices, agricultural stagnation has ensured the constant march, in increasing numbers, of employable people in the villages towards urban areas. At the same time, vote bank politics means that parties and politicians continue to pay lip-service to the cause of villages, chiefly the poor farmer. It is in the light of these changes that the 'culture' surrounding agriculture and the village needs to be understood. While this culture is not altogether a stable one, its state of pronounced flux does hold out certain portents, whether these are understood by policy-makers and the vast majority of Indians, remains open to question.

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I
Country-Town Nexus

There is a certain resistance in accepting the fact that the Indian village is undergoing major changes, not just economically, but culturally as well. The reluctance in coming to terms with this reality arises largely from the widely prevalent belief among intellectuals that the Indian village is timeless and unchanging and that the Indian villager likes nothing more than living in a rural setting. These notions need to be revised, not just for the sake of factual accuracy, but also because of the imperatives of the planning and developmental process. If the village is really the mainstay of India's economy, then that would require a certain set of policy prescriptions that would centralise agriculture. But if, on the other hand, the agrarian character of the village is fast changing then that should certainly inspire a significant shift in perspective, especially when thinking in developmental terms.

It is not as if these changes have not been noticed by others. In fact, this presentation will refer to such studies and, hopefully, build on them. There are two points that need to be noted in this connection. The first is that while there is the acknowledgement that rural India is changing in factual terms, yet at the conceptual level the village and the villagers remain resolutely in the past.[1] This is probably because of the hangover of earlier scholarship, as well as popular conceptions regarding India, that depict Indian society to be essentially rural. So the theoretical cum analytical frameworks remain largely unchanged, while at the level of facts there is a clear recognition that things are not what they used to be.

The second feature that needs to be recognised in terms of contemporary rural dynamics is that it is not urbanisation that is always the critical factor that is impacting the village from the outside. The village landholding structure is such that there are few jobs available in the fields that can engage the rural population on a sustained, albeit, suboptimal, basis. It is true that the availability of urban jobs has made a difference; it is also true that there are more electrified villages in India, many more motorised vehicles, and better roads connecting country to town than was the case a few decades ago. Yet, it is not as if the village is transforming internally entirely on account of urban inputs. In fact, it is the sheer inertia of the agrarian economy, that hardly allows for any optimism, which is forcing people to look elsewhere for both livelihood and respect. In this sense then it is not that the village is changing in one direction towards urbanisation, but rather the impetus for change is taking place in the village itself. Villagers of all description are, in the main, desperately seeking a way out of the contemporary agrarian impasse. The town is not coming to the country, as much as the country is reaching out to the town, leaving behind a host of untidy rural debris.

It is better then to look at the relationship between country and town not only in terms of how the urban world is changing rural life, but also enquiring into the modalities by which villagers are leaving their agrarian pasts for an uncertain non-agrarian present. It would not be quite right to liken their contemporary situation as 'urban', but it is not agrarian either though they continue to live, in the main, in what are still called 'villages'. To live in the village and be alienated from agriculture surely demands a new analytical optic, but for that it needs to be admitted that rural India cannot be comprehended under earlier rubrics. The uprooting of village life from within and the linkages with towns and cities bring to light a country-town nexus within which those who are deracinated at home are structurally compelled to function.

II
Village under Duress

The Indian village is not what is used to be, and is even further from what it has been for long imagined to be. There are unambiguous statistics that point to the falling rates of growth in agriculture, and to the increasing exodus from country to town. On top of this we have the phenomenon of non-farm employment whose scale has increased tremendously over the years. It is estimated today that about 24 per cent of villagers are engaged in non-agricultural occupations. This is not a small number, and in all likelihood, it is probably a conservative estimate.

While these gross statistics do suggest a whittling down of the importance of agriculture as the mainstay of Indian society, there is in addition a general undermining of values and practices that have their origins in the villages and are imbrued with the so-called 'rural ethos'. There was a time, not too long ago, when a jat farmer in Uttar Pradesh or Punjab, would proudly proclaim that farming was the noblest of all occupations. Today this swagger is missing amongst them. They want an urban foothold, and would even condescend to take up occupations in towns and cities that they would deign to perform in their own villages.

The profundity of changes in rural India is not fully captured by census figures, or by statistical surveys. Useful though they are, it is necessary to comprehend the depth of disenchantment that prevails in the villages through in-depth field investigations. This disenchantment is on a variety of fronts. Indian agriculture has always lurched from crisis to crisis. If the monsoons are good then there are floods, if they are bad there are droughts, if the production of mangoes is excellent then there is a glut and prices fall, if the onion crops fail then that too brings tears. The artisanal nature of agriculture has always kept farmers on tenterhooks, not knowing quite how to manage their economy, except to play it by (y)ear.

Even in green revolution areas, where there has been a spectacular increase in mechanisation and chemical inputs, the dependence on the vagaries of the weather and on the insufficiency, and irregularity, of electrical supply and other infrastructural inputs can throw the best agricultural calculations out of gear. It is not surprising then that whenever the occasion arises villagers are more than willing to desert the fields for a future outside the mud walls of their homes and in fields as distant from agriculture as industrial labour. 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.

If rural India has lost its centrality in the minds of most villagers in contemporary India today it is not, as we mentioned earlier, only because an urban world has opened up their horizons, but also because the village economy itself has lost its sustaining power. Consequently, the country side has witnessed a kind of cultural implosion that has shaken many of the verities of the past. With the abolition of landlordism and the introduction of adult franchise (the two must necessarily go hand in hand), old social relations that dominated the country side are today in a highly emaciated form, when not actually dead. Roughly 85 per cent of landholdings are below five acres and about 63 per cent are below even three acres. What land reforms and land redistribution could not do, demography and subdivision of holdings have done to land ownership. Where are the big landlords? There are some, but they are few and far between. But does this make the village an egalitarian utopia? Far from it!

This is where the sociological dimensions need to brought in to give meaning to economic morphology. Without this exercise developmental planning will be a pure formal exercise with no ground level resonance. Medium sized owner cultivators contend against landless labourers, both economically and socially. While the rigidities of the caste systems no longer operate in their pristine form, caste prejudices and identities die hard. The stigma of tradition sits incubus like on social relations even if the prescriptions of tradition cannot be followed with equal facility these days. Other than the lack of economic opportunities, it is the nature of social relations in rural India that drive many poorer castes and classes out of the village. Clearly, the poorer one is, the greater the temptation to up and leave the village before the sun finally sets on one.

Where landholdings are so fragmented there is little scope for agricultural regeneration. Planners would be happy if agricultural production could be sustained year after year, and elated if there is a modest increase of even 1 per cent. Last year, there was in fact a negative growth rate. In small plots there is always a preponderance of family labour and the Chayanovian logic of balancing drudgery and needs usually operates in such cases. But for that to happen without emotional philippics, the needs horizon must curve within the village perimeter. Only then is the family farm a precious gift to be harvested in perpetuity. But now needs have escalated and the family farm is no longer what it was earlier cut out to be. It cannot support the ambition to be where the bright lights are. Nor can family farms provide employment to the landless youth in the villages. Therefore, no matter which way one looks at it, as owner cultivators or as landless labourers, the village is no longer a site where futures can be planned.

III
Pre-conceptions and Conceptions of Village India

That India's villages were changing was noticed in the late 1950s. Several studies, the most renowned being McKim Marriot's edited volume, *Village India* (1955), indicated that India's villages were not little republics. A select group of distinguished anthropologists commented on the fact that the great culture of Hinduism interacts with the little cultures of the villages and in that process both are transformed. Scarlett Epstein's work which was a longitudinal time study of two villages also demonstrated the growing relationship between town and country. Even so, till the late 1960s and early 1970s the importance of farming was overwhelmingly visible, as also the incidence of hired labour even though mechanisation had made some inroads into agriculture

[Epstein 1973: 86,99, 192]. There is not much evidence by way of non-farm occupations except for the number of cafes that have sprung up in the villages she studied (ibid: 117). She also found that the poor in these villages have suffered a definite fall in their standards of living (ibid: 165), though the rich peasants have certainly grown richer with the opening up of the jaggery market (ibid: 171). But otherwise the villages were not terribly influenced by the world outside: their shops buy from without but sell wholly within, and even their university graduates were not expected to "exert much influence over village affairs" (ibid: 240). In spite of changes noticed by Epstein, it appears that the villages she examined over 40 years ago still looked up to agriculture as the mainstay of their economic life. This is notwithstanding the fact that a large number of poorer farmers had become distinctly worse off in the15-year interim between her first study and the second one.

The village has often been essentialised as an idyllic locale where community ties bind the population together. These villages were little republics, timeless and unchanging – obdurate too, in their stasis, but engagingly so. In such conceptions, the Indian village knows no evil, and is counterposed to the harsh and immoral life of the cities. This is where the native 'authentically' lives. Charles Metcalfe, and James Mill were among the early popularisers of this view. Even Marx, who tirelessly championed dialectical movement, fell prey to this 'village republic' conception of rural India. Dynasties may come and go, great wars may be fought by ambitious monarchs and potentates, but the steady hum of village life is scarcely ever disturbed [see Cohn 1987: 213]. According to Ronald Inden, colonial administrators saw the village as the atom of Indian civilisation, no less [Inden 1990: 131]. Much of this can be found in Gandhi's exhortation to revive the Indian village to its earlier authentic existence. He, of course, recognised many of the shortcomings of rural life, but nursed the political goal of returning the village to its pristine ways.

Gandhi was not however unchallenged in the years leading up to the national movement. Peasant leaders like Swami Sahajanand Saraswati brought forth the harshness of village life where the landlords plundered poor peasants and lived off the fat of the land [see Rasul 1974]. The much written about jajmani system was clearly a much romanticised phenomenon [see Wiser 1936; Beidelman 1959]. Even if the perfectly orchestrated organic division of labour based on caste did not quite exist, nevertheless, M N Srinivas argued, "the power wielded by the dominant caste was real" [Srinivas 1987:59]. Members of the dominant caste were the chief patrons of the village [see Beteille 1980: 110-115], though, they had to encounter factional rivalries within [see Dumont 1970: 163-64]. What remained largely undisputed was that everyday life, politics, economics and rituals included, pivoted around the dispensations of the dominant caste. Social anthropology was clearly cured of any romantic naiveté primarily because leaders in the field insisted on the field view and not the book view. The fact that the village community, howsoever defined, did not mean egalitarianism comes through quite clearly in the works of several scholars, foremost among them is perhaps M N Srinivas. Even so, the concept of the dominant caste does not illumine village India today like it used to a few decades ago. Bose (1991), Bandopadhayaya and von Eschen (1991), Harriss (1982), Sahay (2001), Chakravarti (2001) and a host of other authors discussed tensions between agrarian classes, bringing out the severe asymmetry of rural social relations. So for some time now, village India has ceased to be a quiet, idyllic rural haven in academic writings.

Traditionally, caste and village called out to each other in synergy. If the village was said to be tranquil it was argued that caste ideology was responsible for it. This is how the much vaunted jajmani system was understood. Each caste had its specific locus and all castes agreed in the hierarchy of purity where the brahman sat on top. What most scholars failed to notice was that the hierarchy on the ground was not an outcome of ideological acquiescence but an outcome of an unequal distribution of wealth and power in a closed agrarian economy. In fact, every caste values itself and its ritual practices very highly, and no caste actually believes that it is essentially impure. Origin myths of castes clearly demonstrate this. In every instance, these origin tales recall a mythic past when a supposedly 'low caste' actually held a very high status in the distant past. Loss of status took place in such cases because of chicanery, deceit, reversals in war, and sometimes also because the gods were idiosyncratic. But on no account did the members of the so-called lower caste participate willingly in their own subjugation. Nor is it that ideas of grandeur crop up once a caste has economic and political power. In fact, these ideas are always there, except that they cannot be extraverted when conditions are not propitious as in a closed village economy under the sway of a dominant caste. As this aspect of unconditional dominance is rapidly becoming a thing of the past in Indian villages, the assertion of caste identities is becoming much more strident and out in the open. This is also why caste politics has so much purchase in contemporary India [see Gupta 2000 for details].

IV
Caste Identity and Caste System

The gradual diminution of status of the dominant castes and of the earlier village oligarchs who controlled the agrarian economy of the village have brought about a number of changes at the cultural level too. One instance is the stridency with which backward castes and scheduled castes express their political views and preferences. In Uttar Pradesh the impact of the Bahujan Samaj Party has been written about quite extensively and does not need repetition here [see Jaffrelot 2003]. The reason for the rise of scheduled caste political assertion in recent times is primarily because the propertied classes in rural India can no longer exercise economic domination over the landless peasants. As they cannot employ the landless any more because of the shrinking size of their own landholdings, the power of landowners as patrons and as political leaders has also diminished over time.

Apart from the political side of scheduled caste mobilisation in recent years what needs also to be mentioned is the symbolic defiance of the hitherto subaltern castes towards those who, till less than a generation ago, were their unchallenged social superiors. In Punjab, the once low caste chamars now identify themselves as adi-dharmis [Jodhka 2002: 1816]. Without formally rejecting Sikhism they have established their own gurudwaras and do not go to those that are controlled by jat Sikhs. In order to mark their distance further from jats, the adi-dharmis display a portrait or statue of Guru Ravi Das in their gurudwaras. Most adi-dharmis have given up wearing the turban and are clean-shaven though their parents adopted the ubiquitous Sikh visage till not so long ago. In Talhan village in Jalandhar district the ramgarhias (carpenters by caste occupation) have also been drawn into the adi-dharmi fold. The jat Sikhs do not approve of the ascendance of the adi-dharmis but there is little they can do about it. In fact, in Talhan every third adi-dharmi household has a family

member living abroad. I found three beauty salons in the adi-dharmi hamlet of Talhan village. All these are signs of prosperity and a clear indication that the adi-dharmis can do without jat patronage. Even in districts where the adi-dharmis are not as assertive as in Jallandhar, such as in Taran Taran, they, nevertheless, refuse to do menial work, nor will they work in fields owned by jats as agricultural labourers. The mazhabi Sikhs, who were traditionally scavengers, have now begun to be employed as agricultural labourers, when the occasion presents itself, but the adi-dharmis refuse to be engaged in that kind of work anymore as they consider it humiliating to bow before jat landowners. The mazhabi Sikhs still do not have the economic capabilities to oppose jats frontally. Though many of them have their own gurudwaras, as they feel slighted in those run by jats, yet they have not made a defiant, symbolic break with jat culture and orthodoxy as the adi-dharmis have. Yet, the dominant trend everywhere is to seek jobs that are non-agrarian even as they live in what are still called 'villages'. In several instances, both adi-dharmis and mazhabis would not work in a landowner's field if they are able to get a job elsewhere even if the wages are slightly lower. They would rather work as coolies and rickshaw-pullers for, as a mazhabi Sikh said: "At the end of the day I know how much I am taking home as a mazdoor. If I work in the fields of jat landowners I am not sure how much I will be paid and when. This way as a construction labourer or as a rickshaw-puller I am more secure."

This story is a familiar one and is played out in different parts of India by different castes. In Uttar Pradesh the jatavs refuse to be agricultural labourers so the valmikis have taken their place. Even so, the valmikis are not supine either any longer. During my visit to Behrichi village in Saharanpur district of UP, I found that a large number of valmikis had left the village in search of jobs outside to the utter disapproval of the landowning tyagis of that region. The tyagis, like the jat Sikhs of Punjab, cannot complain enough against what they consider the upstart effrontery of those whom they consider to be of low caste. The tyagis never let scheduled castes enter their Shiv temple, and this is an age old phenomenon. In recent years, however, the scheduled castes have built their own temple dedicated to Ravidas and play recorded hymns (bhajans) which are often lifted from popular Hindi films. In Maharashtra, the literate and culturally advanced mahars have for a long time now given up their traditional occupation and have moved over to cities and towns where they are employed in a variety of services. This process has a much longer history in Tamil Nadu, with the chakaliyar (arunthodiar), the pariyar (adi-dravida), and the pallar (devendrakula vellala) showing scant respect today to local dominant castes. In recent years the arunthodiars have raised their levels of defiance by setting up Ambedkar statues which the landed Gouders find objectionable. The arunthodiars are also very mobile and clearly prefer non-farming jobs to working on Gouder fields.

Caste identity has resurfaced at every level now. It is no longer the case that the property less castes in the village could only speak of their origin tales in hushed tones. Now every caste proudly digs into deep pockets of heritage in order to claim an elevated status, frontally denying the station that tradition had accorded to them. Thus while the caste system has collapsed, caste identities are to be seen everywhere in a highly exaggerated form. This has given rise to the optical illusion that the caste system is enjoying a fresh lease of life. In fact, because caste as a system is dying in rural India that caste identities can now afford to come up. In the reign of the closed village economy ruled by the oligarchs of the dominant caste there was little scope for poorer castes to express their sense of self-worth through origin myths without being subjected to persecution from the superior communities. Now that the pressure of the upper class, landed castes has been lifted in the economic domain, the ex-untouchable castes have the space and the opportunity to proudly extravert their origin myths and their sense of identity without fearing reprisals. There are still some pockets where landed castes can be quite domineering, but the writing is already on the wall and the trend is irrevocably set against them.

V
Farmers' Movement

Rural agitations today are no longer between agricultural labourer and landlord as used to be the case as late as the 1970s. During this period there were a large number of organisations with political allegiance to left wing national parties that were active in rural India campaigning for the landless labourer and poor share-cropper. Such mobilisations have become historical anecdotes in most rural regions of contemporary India. Except for certain pockets in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, the concerns of the agricultural worker do not get political expression anywhere else. Even in these areas, such as Bihar, it is not clear to what extent the Naxalite brigades are actually Maoist in their orientation and to what extent they are now extortionate groups feeding off a poorly organised state machinery. The simple reason why such organisations have lost their initial focus is because agricultural labour is no longer a critical issue that involves masses of rural Indians. As most holdings are family farms, the need for wage labour is intermittent during peak seasons. This has reduced the scope for left wing organisations to be active on their own terms.

By the 1980s it was clear that landless labourers had no viable future in the economy of the village. The increasing incidence of family farms made hired labour less critical for agricultural production than before. Where there was substantial agricultural prosperity in the years following the green revolution, such as Punjab and Haryana, labour could be hired from among migrants who came from east India in search of employment. Agricultural prosperity among capitalist farmers almost always meant a scarcity of local labour. This is primarily because even in large farms the amount of labour required per acre decreased substantially owing to mechanisation. Increased prosperity of the region also meant greater opportunities outside the farm which is where the local labour set off for in search of employment. This left the field open for migrants from east India who were happy to get some employment even though they were far from home.

In this context it must also be kept in mind that in many parts of India, particularly in Punjab and west UP, those who worked earlier as agrestic labour are no longer willing to work in the same capacity. As we mentioned earlier, harijans and adi-dharmis of UP and Punjab respectively have more or less set their minds against labouring on others' fields. Cumulatively, this led to the diminution of the agricultural labourer's presence in rural India. By the time the 1980s came around agricultural labourer movements that involved huge rural unions and supra-local organisers became more or less a thing of the past. Now was the turn of Mahendra Singh Tikait and Nanjudaswamy to lead agitations espousing the interests of owner cultivators. In these mobilisations it was clearly stated that anyone who did not own land was not really a farmer. There was no room now for agricultural labourers

in these movements which the Bharatiya Kisan Union of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana articulated most cogently.

Even as the owner cultivators were getting restive, a new configuration was taking place in rural politics. In the past when agricultural labourers mattered most in rural uprisings the target was always the local landlord, jotedar, or thanedar. With the shift to owner-cultivator brand of agitation the enemy was no longer local, but supra-local, even the government of India. Not surprisingly, BKU and Kshetkari Sangathan were constantly moving into cities to impress upon the public, and upon recalcitrant politicians, the authenticity of their demands. Thus while they were still agriculturalists, in the main, already the link between town and country was being strongly established [see Gupta 1997]. Concurrently there was the demand among the same category of owner-cultivators for reservations in urban jobs and in educational institutions. The Mandal recommendations of 1990 were timed just right to coincide with the urban aspirations of cultivating castes such as yadavas, gujars, and jats. An urban job was clearly a prize catch for communities that for generations prided themselves in being farmers first and last. There is a play on a famous couplet in west UP that captures this sentiment rather nicely. The famous Urdu poet, Ghagh, had once eulogised rural life when he wrote: 'Uttam kheti, madhyam baan; nishidh chakri, bhikh nidam.' Translated it means that agriculture is the best, followed by business, salaried jobs and beggary. Today, the villagers have recast the ditty along the following lines: 'Uttam chakri, madhyma baan; nikrisht krishi, bhik mahan.' In this case a politician who begs for vote is on top, followed by a salaried job, and at the bottom of the heap is the agriculturist.

VI
Marginalised World of the Owner-Cultivator

Though it is difficult to say where the process of cultural alienation from the village began, it can nevertheless be maintained that the relative stagnation of the rural economy has contributed significantly to it. This can be gauged not just from the growth rates between industry and agriculture, but also in terms of the quite remarkable shift that is taking place in the number of agricultural workers of all descriptions.

The belief that India is overwhelmingly an agricultural society obviously is in need of further finessing. The sectoral distribution of rural net domestic product for agriculture is down to 54.41 per cent down from 72.37 per cent in 1970-71 [Chadha 2003: 58]. As G Parthasarathy et al argue, workforce changes in India did not match the production structure of its economy [Parthasarathy et al 1998:140]. The National Sample Survey points out that the number of rural people working in urban India has doubled between 1987-88 and 1993-94. Also the annual GDP growth in agriculture in value added terms has declined from 3.5 per cent in the 1980s to 2.8 per cent in the 1990s. Thereafter, the figure dipped even more dismally to 1.3 per cent in 1999-2000 and unbelievably to a negative growth rate of minus 2 per cent in 2000-2001 [Mujumdar 2002: 3983]. Further, trends show that urban households earn more than their counterparts in villages and that the disparity is growing. In a 1975-76 survey urban households earned on an average 1.82 times more than rural households, but today the figure stands closer to 2.1 [Pradhan et al 2000: 2531]. Though there is a noticeable increase in inequality in urban India, poverty levels are on the whole much lower than in the countryside [Vaidyanathan 2001: 1814].

Just because a majority of Indians live in villages, it would be rather hasty to conclude from this that India's national culture is determined by the village. Most of the political debates in the country do not have a rural character at all. This is rather surprising given the fact that a large number of politicians in the parliament and legislatures have rural origins. Occasionally a Mahender Singh Tikait or a Nanjudaswamy will stir things up in the villages, but in the main, political ideologies that inform most of the national parties do not have a strong rural component. The usual concessions are made in terms of subsidies or minimum price for agricultural produce, but the kernel of political ideologies do not reflect any major pre-occupation with the village. Even Laloo Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav demonstrate little by way of rural concerns. Playing the arithmetic of caste does not necessarily mean committing oneself to the chemistry of the village.

Yet, because it is also a question of arithmetic, politicians often vie against each other in appearing as champions of the beleaguered owner-cultivators. Current political discourse shows little concern towards the interests of agricultural labourers. But even here there is a strong element of political gamesmanship at work. In the name of protecting the poor farmer, political parties have in general opposed the institution of tax on agricultural incomes. Yet, as many owner-cultivators have told me repeatedly, this tax concession makes no difference to them as their incomes would be below the taxable amount anyway. These farmers argue that the exemption on agricultural tax is to help the rich entrepreneurial farmers and those in cities who want to escape the burden of taxation by diversifying into agricultural production, or in animal husbandry, or poultry farming, and so forth. At the same time, politicians are alive to the fact that the opening up of agricultural imports would ruin the owner-cultivators who are in substantial numbers. As this would lead to political and economic instability, they are obviously cautious about it. Even so there are peasant activists like Sharad Joshi of Shetkari Sangathan who welcomes an open market for he believes that the peasants in Maharashtra would do very well if they could take their produce abroad. Sharad Joshi's calculations need to be looked at closely, for he is obviously not keeping his books very carefully. To imagine that the Indian farmer could compete against the west where agriculture is industry is quite difficult to conceive. Indeed this is precisely the reason why India constantly opposes moves in international forums to let market dynamics control Indian agriculture.

While the owner-cultivators are protected politically, their futures are left unplanned. In 2000, the National Agricultural Policy formally recognised that agriculture has become "a relatively unrewarding profession," and that efforts to revive it had to be multi-pronged in character. Horticulture, floriculture, the cultivation of aromatic and medicinal plants, over and above animal husbandry and fisheries are some of the alternatives they have presented to improve agriculture. While these recommendations sound good on paper, there are vast infrastructural deficits that have to be overcome. To begin with, the conditions of owner-cultivators do not in general favour heavy investments in chancy cash crops. The suicide rate of farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Punjab is most alarming. In search for a better economic future they had taken loans to upgrade their agricultural production which they could not repay. According to reports, the overwhelming number of suicides among farmers is on account of their inability to pay back loans. Further, this happens with those agriculturists who are ambitious and want to move on, but are suddenly pulled up because the empirical structures are far too

unyielding which makes their attempts to take off lack drive and thrust. Further, the village lacks other kinds of basic facilities like transportation systems, cold storages, modern silos, and a sound marketing framework.

Without this kind of infrastructural back up, the hope that the production of non-food crops will revive the village is not very realistic. Regardless of how feasible this strategy will eventually be, there is no gainsaying the fact that agricultural production of food is far from being either romanticised or valorised for its own sake any longer. Though the majority of Indians live in villages, the village leaves little impress upon the national culture today.

VII
Rural Non-Farm Employment

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the transformations being wrought on rural culture can be gauged from the extent of rural non-farm employment. Till 1983 there were 12 states where the Rural Non-Farm Employment (RNFE) was below 20 per cent. These states included Punjab, Maharashtra and Gujarat. This left only five states where the RNFE was more than 20 per cent. In 1999-2000, roughly 20 years later the situation has changed dramatically. Now 12 states have RNFE figures above 20 per cent and only five are below 20 per cent. In the 50th round of the NSS held in 1993-94, the data suggest that about 32.9 per cent of rural households were outside agriculture. By the 57th round in 2000-02 the percentage has gone up to 35.2 per cent. In fact in Kerala, Haryana and Punjab over 50 per cent of rural households are non-agricultural in the 57th round of the NSS. Further, in Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, and Bihar (yes, Bihar), about 40 per cent of households are non-agricultural.[2] These figures are indeed staggering.

It is however difficult to see any pattern beyond this except to say that RNFE is widely prevalent across the country and is not exactly in proportion to rural prosperity, or the lack of it. This is because Maharashtra and Gujarat have RNFE below 20 per cent in the 1999-2000 survey. These states rank below even Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. But in Punjab the RNFE climbed from a modest 17.4 per cent in 1983 to 27.1 per cent in 1999-2000. In Haryana, likewise, the figure went up from 22.3 per cent in 1983 to over 30 per cent in 1999-2000. Himachal Pradesh showed a dramatic increase for the figure doubled in these years from 12.4 to 25.2 per cent [Chadha 2003:55]. We can approach the same scenario from another angle of vision. If one takes into account the number of male workers engaged in agriculture one again finds a significant drop in numbers from 77.5 per cent in 1983 to 71.4 per cent in 1999-2000. In other words about 30 per cent of male workers in rural India are not working in the primary sector any more [ibid:12; Simmons and Supri 1995:136]. Chadha estimates that the services sector attracts a majority of those who are engaged in RNFE. According to him in 12 of the 17 states in the country, the service sector plays a much 'weightier' role than manufacturing when it comes to RNFE (ibid:16). At any rate the rural non-farm sector contributes as much 45.59 per cent of Rural Net Domestic Product (ibid:58).

But what accounts for the growing incidence of RNFE? True, as we mentioned earlier, the scope for agricultural employment has fallen rapidly, but along side that there has been are focusing of aspirations as well. It is argued that the growth in agricultural production creates many types of post-harvesting activities that relate to trade where a high degree of non-farm employment takes place. Though this argument can be sustained up to a point by demonstrating the extent of RNFE in Punjab and Haryana, it is difficult to explain how the figure is so low in this regard in Maharashtra and rather high in Assam (ibid:55).

It has also been argued that RNFE is an instance of 'distress employment'. Unlike many other historical instances when the fall in rural employment is accompanied by high rate of agricultural growth, RNFE has continuously increased in India in spite of stagnant rates of agricultural growth. Thus, the rural unemployed go out searching for jobs and are willing to do whatever comes their way [Parthasarathy, et al 1998:141]. Simmons and Supri show from their research an inverse relationship between land ownership and RNFE [Simmons and Supri 1995:145]. Eighty eight per cent of their sample who were engaged in RNFE had less than 10 acres of land and hence the deduction that there is a distress aspect in RNFE (ibid:149). There is little doubt that the poorer one is, the greater the pressure to seek off-farm employment. Yet, it must also be mentioned that owning around 10 acres of land in India does not really signify a poor farmer who is in distress.

Our field studies indicate that in Punjab and west UP villages, all castes are active in rural non-farm employment. Adi-dharmis and jats in Jalandhar own stores, run STD booths, sell grocery, sweets and snacks and stitch footballs for multinational companies. Surprisingly, in village Khara in Taran Taran district, we also found jats who work as tailors [Abbi and Singh 1997]. But it also needs to be mentioned that in UP villages the non-landowning caste is more active in RNFE than the landowning communities. In Behirchi in Saharnapur district and Baijalpur in Ballia district, both in UP, the tyagis and thakurs respectively are not as active in non-farm occupations as the other poorer castes are. In fact, in Baijalpur in Ballia, very few thakurs were involved in non-farm occupations, other than joining the army or buying truck and taxis for commercial purposes.

Thus while there are indications that villages in east India are less dynamic than those in north-west India in shedding some of their values and prejudices, what is common in all instances is the general disenchantment with village life. The ambition to leave the village for a better life outside it, or to stay in the village but not to work on land, is too pronounced to be overlooked. It is also true that while RNFE attracts people from diverse castes, their location in the structure of employment outside the farm depends a lot on where they come from, and to the kinds of household they belong. What is also common is that the SCs are not without ambition, and in terms of RNFE they show a much greater degree of aggression. In every village SCs resent the treatment of the hitherto dominant castes, and have in many instances given up performing the menial tasks that they traditionally performed and which they believed, rightly so, to be humiliating in character.

Quite clearly, at an all-India level there is no pattern as such, though traditional and landowning castes in regions such as Uttar Pradesh are less prone to step out of agriculture than their counterparts in places like Punjab. But these are caste specific predispositions, and they cannot be generalised across the country. Nevertheless, what our findings show is that the recourse to non-farm employment varies, not just with respect to one's economic position, but also with caste related attitudes and prejudices.

In an interesting case study by Ruthven and Kumar (2002) it is the availability of off-farm employment that drives the local villagers to seek jobs outside the village. This exodus of locals from the village obviously draws in a sizable number of migrants

who are willing to work for less. And yet, because wages outside agriculture are better, it is those who live in the vicinity who can take advantage of it first. Yet, the study conducted by Parthasarathy et al suggests that the degree of urbanisation in a district has little impact on RNFE [Parthasarathy et al 1998:149]. Certainly, if agricultural income had been plentiful perhaps such labouring jobs in urban areas would have less attractive, but the jury is still out on whether or not it is distress employment, or pure urbanisation, that drives up the figures of RNFE [see Basu and Kashyap 2002:A-180-1].

The availability of jobs outside agriculture is certainly an important factor for RNFE, almost axiomatically so. What one would really like to know is the nature of these jobs and their provenance. Pravin Visaria details the contribution of public utilities investments that have spurred RNFE [Visaria 1995: 404]. Indeed, Ruthven and Kumar's study of a UP village provides empirical micro-level data that substantiates this position [Ruthven and Kumar 2002]. Men are the main takers of jobs that arise from investments in public utilities and construction. In addition, as Visaria pointed out, villages which have gas, electricity and water are places where there is a greater incidence of RNFE [Visaria:404]. Statistically, where land productivity is high, RNFE is also high [Basu and Kashyap 1992:A-181], but this cannot be posited as a general condition either. In some cases it is distress RNFE, in other cases, the incidence of RNFE is driven up by better wages (ibid:A-187). When this happens it helps to increase the bargaining power of farm labourers. What, however, remains incontrovertible is that there is a growing increase in the number of those who work in non-agricultural operations in the village.

Finally, it is, not as if all the non-farm employment is in the villages. Indeed, the number of people working in off-farm jobs outside the village must not be ignored. This is a factor that the census enumerators have not quite grasped and hence the census figures are probably not very reliable. In an earlier work I had pointed out, with data from west UP, that a large number of landless villagers work in towns and cities in the day, but return at night – or even during the weekend [Gupta 1997]. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that RNFE can well be a local phenomenon that is often encouraged by supra-local factors. Further, RNFE is also an indicator of other changes that are occurring in the culture of the village, some of which we have already mentioned.

VIII
The Vanishing Indian Village?

In terms of the many diacritics of village life a lot seems to be changing in rural culture. Old taboos against holding certain kinds of jobs are disappearing. The caste system does not operate though, there is a strong assertion of caste pride and caste identity. Untouchability is not practiced widely, though there are pockets of upper caste intransigence. On the economic front, even prosperous landowners seek a future outside the village or in non-farm enterprises. We did not find too many instances of satisfied farmers. Most of them have grievances against the government for not providing them better amenities.

Predictably, wealthy landed people often have considerable political leverage in villages and form a vested interest group. While many of them draw their wealth and esteem from the village, they either live in cities, or hope to recreate an affluent urban ambience in their rural setting. In stark contrast to the poorer villagers with urban aspirations, when the rural rich engage with the outside world they do so from a position of relative strength. Yet, they too see their future outside the village, or in interacting with the town in enterprises that require rural and urban inputs.

It is against this background that the culture surrounding agriculture must be understood. This culture is not a stable one. History has not left behind a consistent legacy, nor does rural culture have a temporal overhang that is safely cantilevered on present commitments. Agriculture is an economic residue that generously accommodates non-achievers resigned to a life of sad satisfaction. The villager 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.

All this may sound a trifle alarming, but this is what India's villages are telling us whether or not we are inclined to listen to these rustic murmurs. EPW

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Notes

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1 Rural life was portrayed in a variety of ways in the past. For example, 'Do Bigha Zameen', a 1950s classic gave a moving account of a poor peasant eking out a living in the harsh environs of a metropolis as a rickshaw puller so that his family could survive back in the village. The film begins with a song in praise of the rain gods, but when the monsoon fails, the protagonist of the film has no other option but to seek work in the cities in order to pay back the loans he had taken. Shyam Benegal, ideologically committed to a radical revision of a placid village commune, directed films that brings to the fore the colours of rural violence. It is usually the landlords or their henchmen who are the perpetrators of such violence. If in movies such as 'Mirch Masala' or 'Nishant', Benegal gives a vivid picture of exploitation in rural India, other films such as Manoj Kumar's 'Upkaar' glorifies the village, the agriculturalists, and the rural way of life in general. The village is presented largely as a homogeneous community where the moral economy thrives. The agriculturalist is the salt of the earth in more ways than one, and mother India yields food in the villages for her millions. The hit song, 'Is Desh ki Dharti' exemplifies this sentiment.

The city is where the undesirables live with their crass and immoral ways. The city is the home of the black marketer, the cheat, the swindler. Villagers do not drink, smoke or play the fool in nightclubs like city people do. 'Khottey Sikke' and 'Adalat' are two other films which put forward a similar message. 'Lagaan', the latest mega hit, also showed the village as a community, where everybody pulled as one against the extortionate demands of the British administrators in colonial times. In this case, even the native upper crust was presented with sympathy.

The opposition between town and country, or between India and Bharat (Manoj Kumar was called Bharat in one of his movies), is a fairly recurrent theme when Indian cinema deals with the village. In Bimal Roy's other great classic 'Devdas', the hero 'Devdas' lives in idyllic enchantment with his lover in the villages. When Devdas is forbidden from marrying the woman he loves he takes off for the city of Kolkata and it is there that he gives himself up to alcohol with dogged determination. In Mehbooob Khans' 'Mother India', the heroine looks for her husband who has run off to the city and consequently can hardly keep track of his disintegrated character (see Dwyer and Patel 2002: 63-4). Today, the bucolic characters of the Indian village rarely attract viewers any more. It is hard to recall a film made in the late 1990s that extols the Indian village, or glorifies it at the expense of the city. In fact, these counter positions no longer seem to resonate.

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