Nation and Village

Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar

Scholars of modern Indian history have often pointed to the continuities in the colonial constructs of Indian society and the nationalist imaginations of India. The village was an important category where such continuity could be easily observed. However, a closer reading of some of the leading ideologues of nationalist movements also points to significant variations in their views on the substantive realities characterising rural India. Focusing primarily on writings of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, the paper attempts to show that though the village was a central category in the nationalist imaginations and there was virtual agreement that it represented the core of the traditional social order of India, the attitudes of the three leaders towards village society varied considerably. The paper tries to show that while for Gandhi the village was a site of authenticity, for Nehru it was a site of backwardness and for Ambedkar the village was the site of oppression.

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I

> For me, India begins and ends in the villages (Gandhi 1979b:45, in a letter to Nehru written on August 23, 1944.).
> ...the old Indian social structure which has so powerfully influenced our people...was based on three concepts: the autonomous village community; caste; and the joint family system [Nehru 1946:244].
> The Hindu village is the working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing [Ambedkar, in Moon 1989:19].

The village has for long been viewed as a convenient entry point for understanding 'traditional' Indian society. It has been seen as a signifier of the authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by outside influence. For the professional sociologists and social anthropologists, village represented India in microcosm, 'an invaluable observation centre' where one could see and study the 'real' India, its social organisation and cultural life. By studying a village, the pioneering Indian sociologist M N Srinivas claimed, one could generalise about the 'social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India' [Srinivas 1955:99].

Apart from its methodological value, it being a representative unit of the Indian society, village has also been an important ideological category in the modern Indian imagination. The village 'was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation' [Beteille 1980:108]. Though elsewhere also life in the countryside has been contrasted with urban/city life with the former believed to be having a purer form of the native/national culture [see, for example Williams 1973], it was perhaps only in the case of India that the village came to acquire the status of a primary unit representing social formation of the entire civilisation.

Villages have indeed existed in the subcontinent for a long time. However, it was during the British colonial rule and through the writings of the colonial administrators that India was constructed as a land of 'village republics'. Inden has rightly pointed out that though most other civilisations of the Orient too were primarily agrarian economies, it was only the Indian society that was essentialised into a land of villages [Inden 1990:30]. The British colonial rulers obviously had their own political reasons for representing India as they did and imputing qualities such as autonomy, stagnation and continuity to the village life in the subcontinent. It helped them justify their rule over the subcontinent to their people back home in Britain. Since the villages had been autonomous republics, the rulers of India were anyway always outsiders [Cohn 1989; Inden 1990]!

Notwithstanding its historical origins, the idea of village has persisted in the Indian imagination and has found diverse uses. The historians of modern India have repeatedly pointed to the continuities between the orientalist/colonial categories of knowledge and the nationalist thinking [Chakravarty 1989; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Uberoi 1993; Dirks 2001; Upadhya 2002]. Like many other categories, the idea of village too was accepted as given, characterising the Indian realities. Leaders of the nationalist movement, for example, invoked it in many different contexts. Despite disagreements and differences in their ideological orientations or political agenda, the 'village' remained a core category through which most of them conceptualised or thought of the 'traditional' Indian social life. However, unlike the colonial administrators, the nationalist leadership did not see village simply as the constituting 'basic unit' of Indian civilisation. For most of them, village represented 'the real' India, the nation that needed to be recovered, liberated and transformed. Even when they celebrated village life, they did not lose sight of the actual state of affairs marked by scarcity and ignorance.

Apart from having been educated about the Indian society through the colonial writings on the subcontinent, the middle class nationalist leaders were also confronted with the village during their struggle for freedom, trying to mobilise the 'common masses' of the subcontinent against colonial rule. It was during this interaction of the received frameworks acquired through the colonial education and concrete realities of life that their ideas about rural India were formed. Nehru was not the only one who set out on a mission to 'discover' and 'rediscover' India; others active in the independence movement also observed and wrote a great deal about the social, economic and cultural life of the Indian people.

However, given the regional and cultural diversities of the subcontinent, and social locations of the individual ideologues of the nationalist movement, the Indian social life was viewed differently by different leaders. The nationalist freedom movement was also a moment when the futures of India were being visualised. Their notions of India's pasts or its traditional social order invariably also reflected their future visions or the alternative agenda they had for free India. Village remained a central category in their scheme of things. Even in the constituent assembly, which was appointed to frame a constitution for free India, the question of whether the village or the individual should be the primary unit of Indian polity was debated with much passion.

Apart from influencing state policies for development and change in independent India, these constructs have also become part of, what could loosely be called as 'the Indian common sense'. For example, in some of the recent critiques of modern living, the idea of the traditional 'Indian village community' is invoked as an alternative to the alienating urban/city life. Many of the nationalist writings on the village have also become inspirations for some of the 'new' social movements that have emerged in India during the recent decades. Perhaps the most important in this category have been the writings of Gandhi. His critiques of modern science and his idea of an alternative living on the pattern of the traditional Indian village communities have all along been popular with a good number of environmentalists, in and outside India, and with many of the action groups, the non-governmental voluntary organisations (the NGOs).

A good deal of social scientific literature is available on the colonial constructions of the Indian village and the validities of their assumptions regarding the social and economic structures of the rural communities of the subcontinent [see for example Cohn 1987; Breman 1987; Breman et al 1997; Habib 1995]. Similarly, there have also been some studies on the manner in which village was used as a primary methodological category for understanding the Indian society by sociologists and social anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s [Srinivas 1994; Breman et al 1997; Jodhka 1998]. Though one can also find a good deal of references on the ways in which the nationalist leadership approached the Indian village or the 'agrarian question', there have not been many comparative studies of the internal disagreements and differences within the nationalist leadership on the subject.

While much significance is attached to Gandhi's ideas of the Indian village, other strands of the nationalist movement tend to generally get ignored or subsumed within the Gandhian notion of village. Ambedkar's ideas on village, for example, were very different from those of Gandhi. Similarly, though Nehru agreed with Gandhi on many issues relating to rural India, his writings on the Indian peasantry, on the whole, present a very different approach to the subject. Even Gandhi's ideas on the Indian village are not as simple as they are often made out to be.

Focusing primarily on writings of these three leading activists and ideologues of the freedom movement, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, I hope to show in this paper that though village was a central category in the nationalist imaginations and there was a virtual agreement on the fact that it represented the core of the traditional social order of India, the attitudes of these leaders towards the village society varied considerably. They disagreed, both on the merits of traditional Indian village life, and also on the place it should have in the future India of their visions.

The Indian nationalist movement has mostly been seen as a subject that ought to concern the historians, and to a lesser extent the political scientists. Anthropologists and sociologists have only rarely ventured into it as something of their interest.[1] Since the village has been one of the most popular categories among sociologists and social anthropologists in India, a comparative study of the representations of rural life in the nationalist imagination could perhaps also help us build a sociology of the Indian nationalist movement.

Further, available literature on the history of Indian sociology and social anthropology tends to attach a good deal of importance to the influence that colonial writings and the western theoretical traditions have had on the way these disciplines are practised in India today. However, it would be safe to underline that the nationalist movement for independence, and later, the programmes and policies of planned development introduced by the post-independence Indian state also influenced the practice of social science research and teaching in India. Sociology and social anthropology were no exception. Some of the founding fathers of Indian sociology and social anthropology, for example, were deeply involved with the nationalist movement.[2]

II

Colonial Context and the Nationalist Imaginations of India

Introduction of modern technology and the hitherto unknown structures of governance by the British colonial rulers during their rule over much of the south Asian subcontinent were extremely important factors in transforming the social, cultural and political life of the region. While these structural changes introduced by the colonial rulers were indeed extremely significant factors in integrating India into the world capitalist market, it was perhaps the nationalist movement for independence that became the defining moment of the 'modern' Indian society, a source of its new identity.

The nationalist movement for independence was much more than just a political struggle waged against foreign rulers. Not only did the national identity of modern India consolidate itself during these mobilisations, many of the regional and community identities were also shaped and sharpened during this period. Along with the rise of these identities, the newly emerged middle classes also spent a great deal of energy in generating new knowledges about their cultures and regions.

While most of the reformers were preoccupied with localised communities, trying to find ways and means of negotiating between the traditions they inherited from their pasts and the ensuing modernity that

they received from the colonial educational system, the politically oriented amongst them had a much broader agenda. The challenge for them was to work out a case where India could be represented as a single cultural and political entity, on the basis of which they could imagine nationhood for India. Finding denominators and categories through which such a case could be made was obviously a challenging project. To the advantage of these ideologues of the nationalist and regional movements, the colonial rulers had already done a considerable amount of groundwork on this. Apart from writing extensively on the religious traditions of the communities in the subcontinent, and constructing India as an ancient civilisation, the colonial administrators had also gathered a good deal of information on the social structure and economic life of the Indian people. In the process of gathering this data they also deployed several categories that enabled them to make sense of the Indian society and situate it in the available evolutionary schema that were being worked out in the western academy around the same time [Cohn 1987, 1996; Inden 1990]. The 'caste system' and the 'village communities' were perhaps the two most important categories that the colonial ethnography deployed rather extensively to make sense of Indian society and to distinguish it from the west. Over the years, these two categories came to be accepted, almost universally, as the concrete social unit in terms of which the social structure of traditional India was to be talked about.

Much of this colonial knowledge of India would have obviously been found to be very useful by the middle class leaders of the Indian nationalist movement while trying to visualise India as a unified national entity. Many of these ideas about India would have initially come to them as plain or obvious 'facts' or 'truths' about their society. However, their involvement with mobilisations of the Indian masses and in this process their first-hand exposure to the realities of India, would have also been equally important factors in shaping their understandings of the Indian society. It would perhaps be safe to say that it was the combination of the received knowledges about India from available literature produced mostly by western writers, and the nature of their involvement with the people of the subcontinent that eventually shaped their own views of the Indian village.

III

Nation and the Village

Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, the three most important leaders and ideologues of the freedom movement, all, in a sense, belonged to the city. Not only did they spend most of their lives in cities, much of their political action was also performed in urban centers. Of the three, Ambedkar was the only one who had a first hand experience of village life during his childhood. Though in terms of the class status of their families, the three came from completely different strata, they all belonged to mobile families, in the sense that even their parents had been 'mobile'. Occupationally also, they were engaged in 'secular' occupations.[3] They all went to foreign lands for education or work and came back to India.

Thus, notwithstanding their attitudes or commitments to rural life, their writings on the subject were mostly reflective, and not experiential in nature. Yet their views on village life were not mere observations of what was happening on ground. They reflect their visions of India's pasts and futures. In fact none of them looked at village as a concrete reality with regional variations and historical specificities having internal dynamics of change. Irrespective of their attitude and the overall ideological orientation towards it, village for all of them was a civilisational entity. More importantly, they seemed to have assumed that the social structure of the village was similar everywhere in the subcontinent.

IV

Gandhi and the Village

Gandhi has been rightly known as the ideologue of the village. He celebrated the Indian village life as no one else did. He also wrote and spoke a great deal on various aspects of village life. Though, as mentioned above, he was not born in a village and did not even have 'an ancestral village' to identify with, much of his social and political philosophy revolved around the idea of the village.

Gandhi became preoccupied with 'the Indian village' right from his days in South Africa and remained so until the end of his life. However, his ideas on village, as also his politics, evolved with time and underwent some important changes along with his political career.

There are at least three different stages or ways in which he used the idea of the Indian village. In the first, he invoked it to establish equivalence of the Indian civilisation with the west. In the second, he counterposed the village to the city and presented the village-life as a critique of, and an alternative to, the modern western culture and civilisation. In the third phase of his engagement, he was concerned with the actual existing villages of India and emphasised on the ways and means of reforming them. Though he continued to see village as an alternative way of living, he also found many faults with the existing lifestyle of the rural people in the Indian countryside.

It was perhaps in 1894 that Gandhi for the first time invoked the idea of the Indian village as a political symbol. This was in a petition to the White government, an 'open letter' written to the Members of Legislative Assembly in Durban to demand voting rights for the people of Indian origin living in South Africa at par with the ruling English people. Gandhi argued in his petition:

> In spite of the Premier's opinion to the contrary...I venture to point out that both the English and the Indians spring from a common stock, called the "Indo-Aryan" [Gandhi 1958:149].

The idea of village was used to further corroborate his argument and establish equivalence of the Indians with the ruling English community. In another 'petition to the Natal Assembly' in the same year he made reference to Sir Henry Maine's works on the village communities who,

> …most clearly pointed out that the Indian races have been familiar with representative institutions almost from the time immemorial….The word panchayat is a household word throughout the length and breadth of India, and it means...a council of five elected by the class of the people whom the five belong, for the purpose of managing and controlling the social affairs of the particular caste [ibid:94-95].

Apart from his assertion about the traditional Indian village and its core social institution, the caste, as being compatible with the modern western ideas of democracy for their having been similarly organised on the principles of representative governance, the text also points to his sources of understanding the Indian village. It was not just to strengthen his argument being presented to the White rulers that Gandhi invoked the writings of a western commentator on India. The influence of

Sir Henry Maine and that of other western/colonial writings on the Indian village is visible all through his career.

Perhaps another important point that emerges out of these letters written to the White rulers of South Africa is his attitude towards the native African tribes. Gandhi, for example, makes no reference to the exclusion of 'blacks' from such rights. The Indians deserved the right to vote not because democracy required universal franchise but because of the nature and evolution of traditions in different communities. By invoking the idea of 'village republics' he obviously wished to argue that the Indians who have had a system of representation built into the caste panchayats were as advanced a community as the Whites were.

His more substantive and better-known writings on the village began when he came back to India and got involved with the nationalist freedom struggle. His move from South Africa to India changed both his location and his political concerns. Though in some crucial sense his notion of the Indian village remained the same, the uses he put it to in the second phase were however very different. After he returned back to India and engaged himself with the movement for independence, his politics underwent a complete change. The question of securing voting rights for the Indian people and establishing equivalence with the Whites was no longer his agenda. He was to assume the leadership of movement for independence from the British, which required driving the White rulers out of India.

In order to wage such a struggle, he needed a different set of ideas or an ideology that would de-legitimise the British rule over India. Such an ideology required construction of a difference that would establish the sovereign identity of India and restore its cultural confidence. The idea of village came in very handy in this endeavour.

He did this by counterposing the Indian village with the modern cities that were set up by the British in India. While the village-life represented the essence of India, the development of modern cities in India symbolised western domination and colonial rule. Village was the site of authenticity, the 'real/pure India', a place that, at least in its design, had not yet been corrupted by the western influence. The city was its opposite, totally western.

Though political freedom could be achieved by overthrowing the colonial rule, the real swaraj or self-rule, as Gandhi imagined, could be achieved only by restoring the civilisational strength of India through revival of its village communities. 'The uplift of India depended solely on the uplift of the villages'. The growth of big cities, particularly those established by the British, was no sign of progress. They were signs of degeneration, 'the real plague spots of India' [Parel 1997:xlii]. In a letter addressed to Lord Ampthill in 1909, he wrote:

> To me the rise of cities like Calcutta and Bombay is a matter for sorrow rather than congratulation. India has lost in having broken up a part of her village system [Gandhi 1963:509].

He elaborated it further in *Young India* in 1921:

> Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages, and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years [Gandhi 1966:288-89].

He reiterated his views on cities in exactly the same tenure some 25 years later, in 1946 at a workers' meeting, where he said:

> When the British first established themselves firmly in India their idea was to build cities where all rich people would gravitate and help them in exploiting the countryside. These cities were made partially beautiful; service of all kinds were made available to their inhabitants while the millions of villagers were left rotting in hopeless ignorance and misery [Gandhi 1982:232].

Perhaps more important for the argument being developed here is the manner in which he counterposed the city with the village.

> The village civilisation and the city civilisation are totally different things. One depends on machinery and industrialisation, the other rests on handicrafts. We have given preference to the latter. After all, this industrialisation and large-scale production are only of comparatively recent growth. We do not know how far it has contributed to our development and happiness, but we know this much that it has brought in its wake the recent world wars...
>
> Our country was never so unhappy and miserable as it is at present. In the cities people may be getting big profits and good wages, but all that has become possible by sucking the blood of villagers [Gandhi 1977a:369].

Not only were the big cities symbols of alien rule and exploitation, they also had a morally corrupting influence on the village people. In another piece in *Young India* published in 1927, he wrote:

> Some of the villages are deserted for six or eight months during the year. Villagers go to Bombay, work under unhealthy and often immoral conditions, then return to their villages during the rainy season bringing with them corruption, drunkenness and disease [Gandhi 1969:151].

Apart from the critique of western civilisation and colonial rule that he attempted through counterposing the village and the city, his politics was perhaps also a pointer to the shift that he brought about in the nationalist movement, from an elite-bourgeois activity directed at mobilising the newly emerging middle classes to a popular movement with growing participation of the peasantry from India's hinterlands. As Embree rightly points out, he, for the first time, gave the masses of India 'a sense of involvement in the nation's destiny' [Embree 1989:165]. As is well known, until Gandhi arrived on the scene, the nationalist movement had largely been an urban phenomenon. 'For the early nationalist generations, independence meant being free to emulate colonial city life' [Khilnani 1998:125]. Gandhi turned it upside down. The new nation was not to be found in the cities but in the villages where a large majority of the Indians lived.

What exactly was his notion of the Indian village and how did he visualise the actually existing rural India?

Village, for Gandhi was not merely a place where people lived in small settlements working on land. For him, it reflected the essence of Indian civilisation. The Indian village had a design, a way life, which had the potential of becoming an alternative to the city based and technology driven capitalist west. Empirically such villages did exist in the past and one might still find them in the interiors of India. Drawing support for his argument from Sir Henry Maine's writings, he argued in *Harijan* in 1939:

> ...Indian society was at one time unknowingly constituted on a non-violent basis. The home life, i e, the village, was undisturbed by the periodical visitations from barbarous hordes. Maine has shown that India's villages were a congeries of republics [Gandhi 1978:4].

Similarly, responding to a question from a group of foreign visitors he advised them

that if they wanted to 'see the heart of India', they should 'ignore big cities'. The big cities here were but poor editions of their big cities. They ought "to go to the villages, and those too not close to cities or to railway line, but unspoilt by them". He suggested them to:

> Go 30 miles from the railway line, and you will see that the people show a kind of culture which you miss in the west...you will find culture which is unmistakable but far different from that of the west. Then you will take away something that may be worth taking [Gandhi 1976:116-17].

He was very unhappy with the nature of changes that the Indian village life had gone through during the British colonial rule. In his views, these changes had impaired the villagers, made them less creative and more dependent on the outside world:

> …the villager of today is not even half so intelligent or resourceful as the villager of fifty years ago. For, whereas the former is reduced to a state of miserable dependence and idleness, the latter used his mind and body for all he needed and produced them at home [Gandhi 1974:409].

Gandhi emphasised that freedom from colonial rule could become meaningful only if it was able to grant this autonomy back to the village:

> The cry of 'back to the village', some critics say, is putting back the hands of the clock of progress. But is it so? Is it going back to the village, or rendering back to it what belongs to it? I am not asking the city-dwellers to go to and live in the villages. But I am asking them to render unto the villagers what is due to them [ibid:409-10].

While he asked for revival of the spirit of traditional village life, he also found many flaws with the actually existing villages, and not all these ills were a consequence of the western/urban influence. Two things that he commented quite frequently upon were the practice of untouchability and a general lack of cleanliness. Compared to the cities, where people were "educated and broad-minded to a little extent at least", untouchability was a more serious problem in the villages, which were "the centres of orthodoxy".

While he wanted the village society to abandon the practice of untouchability, he also wanted untouchables to change themselves. He, for example, wanted them to 'observe common cleanliness', "refrain from eating meat of dead animals and from drink, send their children to schools, remove untouchability among themselves and generally carry on such reforms from within as is possible" [Gandhi 1972:406].

The lack of hygiene and sanitation were the other things that all villagers needed to pay attention to. He was often disappointed by the disregard for cleanliness that he observed in most of the villages he visited in different parts of the subcontinent. He also wrote quite extensively on this subject. In one of these typical comments, he wrote:

> If we approach any village, the first thing we encounter is the dunghill and this is usually placed on raised ground. On entering the village, we find little difference between the approach and what is within the village. Here too there is dirt on the roads...If a traveller who is unfamiliar with these parts comes across this state of affairs, he will not be able to differentiate between the dunghill and the residential parts. As a matter of fact, there is not much of a difference between the two [Gandhi 1970:445].

In another piece, he praised the Europeans in Africa as being worth imitating in this regard:

> There is no gainsaying the fact that our villager betrays a woeful ignorance of even the rudiments of village sanitation. One could deplore the race prejudice amongst the South African Europeans, but their attempts to keep their towns healthy and sanitary were heroic and worthy of imitation [Gandhi 1969:76].

Though he repeatedly talks about reviving the village, particularly its 'defunct handicrafts' to save the peasant from ills of industrialisation and inevitability of moving to the cities [Gandhi 1977b:228], a closer look at his writings tends to suggests that his vision of village was essentially 'a futuristic one', representing an alternative society that was different from the modern-industrial west. His villages would have had similarities with what Sir Henry Maine had written in his book about the past village society, but not everything that is believed to have existed in the past needed to be there in such a 'model village'. His writings reflect more of a reformist rather than a revivalist urge. His village had to be constructed through a concerted effort, often by outsiders – the village workers. He wanted to initiate a movement of village 're-construction' which would translate his ideal into practice.

Such a village would provide an alternative not only to the industrial west, but also to socialism. He was averse to socialism because it required the use of "violence as a measure to achieve it". Villageism, on the contrary, could achieve social welfare without using such measures [Gandhi 1980:192].

And perhaps most importantly, a village-centric society was the most pragmatic choice for a country like India because its 'crores of people would never be able to live in peace with each other in towns and palaces'. In a letter addressed to Nehru in October 1945, he had argued that a society based on the principle of non-violence was possible to achieve only "in the simplicity of village life". However, by simplicity he did not mean that his 'dream-village' would completely exclude modern science. A certain amount of science and modern means of communication could be integrated into such a village [as in Parel 1977:150-51]

His idea of an alternative India is perhaps best spelt-out in one of his pieces published in *Harijan* in 1942 where he wrote:

> My idea of village swaraj is that it is completely republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every villager's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth…Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like…Education will be compulsory upto the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability…The government of the village will be conducted by a panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications.
> …To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results...[Gandhi 1979a:308-09].

What would happen to the already existing cities? He did not ask for their destruction. The cities, he appealed, should also participate in 'the village movement'. Those living in cities and those working for the movement will "have to develop village mentality and learn the art of living after the manner of villagers". Though they need not "starve like the villagers", they must change their old style of life radically. "While the standard of the villagers must be raised, the city standard has to undergo considerable revision" [Gandhi 1975:319-20].

Gandhi was certainly not the only one in the freedom movement who saw village and its social structure as something that needed to be sustained and strengthened. He influenced a large number of others and his ideas on the village as an alternative to the modern/industrial west continue to inspire many even today. However, there were also some in the freedom movement who disagreed with him, particularly on the subject of the place of village in future India. Even some of those who worked very closely with him did not completely share his enthusiasm for the village. Nehru was one of them.

V

Nehru and the Village

After Gandhi, Nehru was perhaps the most important and influential leader of the Indian nationalist movement. Apart from being an important ideologue of the Indian National Congress, he also became the first prime minister of independent India. He was the catalyst of the approach India chose for its development after it achieved independence from colonial rule.

Though Nehru worked under the leadership of Gandhi and gave him a good deal of respect, his ideas on the nature of India's past and his vision of its future were not the same as those of Gandhi. These differences were also reflected in his views on the Indian village.

Unlike Gandhi, Nehru perhaps never identified himself with the village. He was also quite self-conscious about his urban and upper middle class upbringing. He admits in his *Autobiography* (first published in 1936) that until 1920 or so his 'political outlook' was that of his class, 'entirely bourgeois' [Nehru 1980:49]. It was only when he started his political career and came in direct contact with the common rural masses of India that he began to think differently. It was "a new picture of India…, naked, starving, crushed, and utterly miserable" [ibid:52].

As was the case with Gandhi, Nehru's writings on village too have several different strands and could be classified into two or three categories. First of all, as in Gandhi, the idea of the Indian village communities is also quite central to his notion of traditional India. However, his approach to the 'realities' of rural classes as he saw them during his encounters with 'the actually existing rural India' was very different from Gandhi's. As mentioned above, Nehru's importance also lies in the fact that he was the first prime minister of independent India and played a crucial role in shaping its policies and programmes for development. His comments on how rural India ought to be developed also reflect his notion of Indian village life.

His ideas on the traditional Indian society are perhaps best spelt out in his well-known book, *Discovery of India* (first published in 1946). Though Nehru's approach to the understanding of Indian past was historical in nature, he apparently looked at the 'old' social structure of Indian society from an evolutionary perspective. This is particularly so in his discussion on village and caste. "The autonomous village community, caste and the joint family", that he identified as the three basic concepts of the "old Indian social structure", had something in common with traditional societies in general as the organising principles were the same everywhere:

> In all these three it is the group that counts; the individual has a secondary place. There is nothing very unique about all this separately, and it is easy to find something equivalent to any of these three in other countries, especially in medieval times [Nehru 1946:244].

He further elaborated his 'functionalist' notion of an integrated traditional village society in the following text:

> ...The functions of each group or caste were related to functions of the other castes, and the idea was that if each group functioned successfully within its own framework, then society as a whole worked harmoniously. Over and above this, a strong and fairly successful attempt was made to create a common national bond which would hold all these groups together – the sense of a common culture, common traditions, common heroes and saints, and common land to the four corners of which people went on pilgrimage. This national bond was of course very different from present-day nationalism; it was weak politically, but socially and culturally it was strong [ibid:248].

Though Nehru did not celebrate the old 'village republics' of India as Gandhi did, the sources of their understanding of India's past seem to be common. Nehru too seems to have read the writings of colonial administrators and western scholars on the 'traditional Indian society' quite uncritically. This is best reflected in his comments on the 'old' agrarian economy. He writes:

> Originally the agrarian system was based on a cooperative or collective village. Individuals and families had certain rights as well as certain obligations, both of which were determined and protected by customary law [ibid:246].

He produced, almost verbatim, what Metcalfe and later Marx had said about the Indian village communities.[4]

> Foreign conquests brought war and destruction, revolts and their ruthless suppression, and new ruling classes relying chiefly on armed force…The self-governing community, however, continued. Its break up began only under the British rule [ibid:246].

Similarly, in relation to village panchayats and political spirit of the traditional Indian village, he reinforced the prevailing notion about the village society as having been economically stagnant and community-oriented but democratically organised. The traditional social structure emphasised 'the duties of the individual and the group' and not 'their rights'.

> The aim was social security: stability and continuance of the group; that is of society. Progress was not the aim, and progress therefore had to suffer. Within each group, whether it was the village community, the particular caste, or the large joint family, there was a communal life shared together, a sense of equality, and democratic methods [ibid:252].

However, he also emphasised that such a system of village republics had long degenerated into a society that was marked by various ills. There was a clear shift in Nehru's discussion on village life as he moved closer to contemporary times. He appears to have become more and more critical of the past structures, particularly of caste based hierarchies, which, in his scheme of things, should have no place in modern societies. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru saw no virtues in reviving the traditional social order. His modernist critique of the village and caste system is best presented in the following passage from *Discovery of India*:

> ...the ultimate weakness and failing of the caste system and the Indian social structure were that they degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunities to get out of that condition – educationally, culturally, or economically...In the context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can there be political democracy, and much less, economic democracy [Nehru 1946:254].

This shift becomes even more evident as we move to his comments/writings on Indian rural society of the colonial period. Not only did he become more critical of the traditional social order but he also began to increasingly talk about the existing social and economic structures of the village society in terms of 'social classes'. The peasants/kisans and landlords were the two classes that he frequently made reference to.

His writings clearly reflect a modernist attitude to the village class structure. He, for example referred to the landlords as a "physically and intellectually degenerate" class, which had 'outlived their day' [Nehru 1980:52]. On the other end, the peasants or "the kisans, in the villages" constituted the real masses of India [Gopal 1973:82].

The shift perhaps was also a consequence of his growing first hand encounters with the rural masses after the 1920s. He described quite lucidly the prevailing structure of agrarian relations while describing one such encounter with peasants in the following passage:

> I listened to their innumerable tales of sorrow, their crushing and ever-growing burden of rent, illegal extraction, ejectments from land and mud hut, beatings; surrounded on all sides by vultures who preyed on them – zamindar's agents, moneylenders, police; toiling all day to find that what they produced was not theirs and their reward was kicks and curses and a hungry stomach [Nehru 1980:52].

Nehru also developed his critique of the colonial rule through such accounts of the existing state of affairs in rural India. What he describes in the passage quoted above was not merely what he observed in a particular village. He saw landlordism as being organically linked to British rule. It was the British rulers who had in the first place implanted the landlord system in India "with disastrous results" [Nehru 1946:246] and they (the landlords) could survive in India "only so long as an external power like the British government props them up" [ibid:58].

He also blamed the British for disturbing the old economic equilibrium of the village. They implanted exploitative agrarian relations and destroyed the local industry, taking away non-agricultural sources of employment that were available to the local people. Elaborating his argument on India's deindustrialisation, he writes:

> The Indian farmer who used to supplement his income by plying the *charkha* in his spare time was also suddenly deprived of his extra income. Weavers, carders and dyers became unemployed. They were forced to fall back on the land for livelihood, by cultivating the land or by working as labourers, but there was already enough pressure on the land. The result was that the majority of the people were compelled to act as farm labourers, and somehow keep alive...And this poverty began from the time the British came here because they started their own trade while destroying ours [Gopal 1972:365].

Though he attributed the peasants' misery to their exploitation by landlords and the colonial rulers, he shared with western writers the popular opinion on the political character of Indian peasantry as being politically docile and fatalistic.

> Indian peasant has an amazing capacity to bear famine, flood, disease, and continuous grinding poverty – and when he could endure it no longer; he would quietly and almost uncomplainingly lie down in his thousands or millions and die. That was his way of escape [Nehru 1980:306].

How did he visualise the future of Indian rural society? How far did he agree and/or disagree with Gandhi?

Though Nehru and Gandhi seem to agree on the nature of traditional Indian village society, Nehru's critique of village life, as also of the British rule, are very different from those of Gandhi. Perhaps the most critical difference between Gandhi and Nehru was their attitude towards the question of class and the class structure of the Indian agrarian society. While Gandhi almost always spoke about the village in a populist language, in terms of village as a unit with an underlying assumption about the unity of its interests, Nehru recognised and, in his later writings, foregrounded the internal differences in the rural society, the contradictions between landlords and the peasantry. Similarly, while Gandhi advocated the need for reviving the 'essential spirit' of village life, Nehru wanted to transform the village social and economic structure by using modern technology and changing agrarian relations. The landlords and landlordism, in his scheme of things, would have no place in independent India.

The kisans, on the other hand, were the real 'masses of India'. The colonial rulers were not the only enemies that the kisans had. The local landlords were as much a problem. Their difficulties 'in the main related to such questions as rent, ejectment and possession of lands'. 'Swaraj would be of little avail if it did not solve' the problems of the kisans [Gopal 1973:82].

The policies of land reforms introduced after independence were a direct translation of such thinking. If agriculture was to develop, it was necessary that we put 'an end to zamindari and jagirdari systems. We must…eliminate all intermediaries and fix a limit for the size of holdings [Nehru 1954:94].

Similarly, Nehru also had very different views on the place that industry would have in the Indian economy. While Gandhi thought that villages could largely be self-sufficient and rejected the modern cities for their being a sign of colonial domination, Nehru saw industrialisation as being inevitable. Industrial development and urbanisation would help in reducing the burden on land and therefore would be good even for those who would be left in the village. Addressing the Associated Chamber of Commerce in Calcutta in December 1947, he had said:

> ...while we want to help the peasants and agriculturalists, industry also is of dominant importance in India. Agriculture can produce wealth but it will produce more wealth (if) more people are drawn from agriculture and put in industry. In fact, in order to improve agriculture we must improve industry (sic). The two are allied [Gopal 1986:566].

He also differed with Gandhi on the use of modern technology in agriculture. Instead of celebrating the traditionalist streak among the cultivators, he criticised them for 'using outdated methods', and for being 'content with whatever little they produced'. In contrast to Gandhi, he thought that modern technology was good for farmers. They could produce twice or thrice as much as they did if they learnt new techniques of farming [Gopal 1997:86-90].

However, he did share with Gandhi the need for a revival of handicrafts and cottage industry. The modern industry could not absorb all the surplus population, whatever may be its pace of development. "Hundreds of millions will remain who would have to be employed chiefly in agriculture". While development of the industry was necessary if we were to remain free, "the development of heavy industry would not by itself solve the problem of the millions in this country". Thus India needed to revive "the village and cottage industry in a big way" [Nehru 1954:84].

Need of reviving the cottage and small-scale industry was not the only point where Nehru spoke the language of

Gandhi. He also shared with Gandhi his broad philosophical approach to the village (also see above his notion of the traditional Indian village in the beginning of this section). Though, economically the village of future India could not be self-sufficient, socially and politically his ideas were pretty much the same as those of Gandhi. The following text is useful evidence of this:

> The village, which used to be an organic and vital unit, became progressively a derelict area, just a collection of mud huts and odd individuals. But still the village holds together by some invisible link, and old memories revive. It should be easily possible to take advantage of these age-long traditions and to build up communal and cooperative concerns in the land and in the small industry. The village can no longer be self-contained economic unit…but it can very well be a governmental and electoral unit, each such unit functioning as a self-governing community within the larger political framework and looking after the essential needs of the village…I feel sure that the village should be treated as a unit. This will give truer and more responsible representation [Nehru 1946:534-35].

Thus, though Nehru's approach to industry and technology and the place they ought to have in the future of India were very different from Gandhi, he was not untouched by the influence of Gandhi. More crucially, perhaps, their sources of understanding India's past were mostly common. They both read the writings of colonial/western scholars on India rather uncritically. This seems particularly so with their understandings of the 'old' Indian village. The western writers, after all, had presented the Indian past in good light and these leaders had learnt much of their concepts of history and politics from the western education system.

It was left to B R Ambedkar, who hardly had any stakes in the glorification of traditional India, to develop a radical critique of the Indian village. Being a dalit and having spent a part of his childhood in a village of Maharashtra, he knew what living in a village meant for a dalit. He obviously had no attraction for orientalist notions of India that celebrated its past.

VI

Ambedkar and Indian Village

When compared with Gandhi and Nehru, the influence of B R Ambedkar was rather limited, particularly during the movement for Indian independence. However, over the years, he has grown in stature. As Eleanor Zelliot has rightly pointed out, he is perhaps the only pre-independence leader who has continued to grow in fame and influence throughout the contemporary period [Zelliot 2001].

The significance of Ambedkar lies in his social background. Over the years, he has come to represent the most downtrodden sections of the Indian society, the 'untouchables' and the dalits. Though like Gandhi and Nehru he too was well educated and had spent a good part of his youth in the west, he identified, almost completely, with the dalit cause. This was reflected in his thinking and politics. Like Gandhi and Nehru he too wrote a great deal on India.[5]

As mentioned above, of the three ideologues of the freedom movement being compared here, Ambedkar was the only one who had a first hand experience of village-life and that too of looking at it from below, as a dalit child. Apart from having been born in a village, his last name, Ambavadekar, as it was initially registered in school, was also derived from his 'native' village called Ambavade. It was only later that a teacher in his school changed it to Ambedkar, giving him his own name [see Keer 1962:14].

Though his father was a mobile dalit and was employed in a 'secular' occupation, Ambedkar could not escape the difficulties of his caste and class background during his childhood. The economic hardships that his family experienced during his childhood are quite starkly reflected in the fact that of the 14 children born to his mother, only five survived. Though he grew up to be a barrister with a degree in law and Doctor of Science from western universities, he could never forget the experiences of his childhood and the humiliations of being a dalit. It is this experience that was, to a significant extent, to shape his political outlook as also his perspective on the village life. Thus, in Ambedkar we find, what could be called, a dalitist view of the village.

Like most of his contemporaries, Ambedkar too spoke about the Indian society and the village life in civilisational terms. Despite recognising the obvious cultural diversities, the social structure of the Indian village was, for all of them, the same everywhere. However, unlike others, Ambedkar saw the Indian civilisation as being a Hindu civilisation. More importantly, he saw dalits as not being a part of this Hindu society. The structure of village settlements too reflected this basic tenet. Quite like the Hindu civilisation, village too was divided:

> The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow the untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters…It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside the barbed wire into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto [Ambedkar 1948:21-22].

Thus for Ambedkar, village presented a model of the Hindu social organisation, a microcosm. It was 'the working plant of the Hindu social order, where one could see the Hindu social order in operation in full swing'. Though he often used the expression Indian village, the village, for him, did not include the untouchables, who lived outside, in the 'ghetto'.

The Indian village was not a single unit. It was divided into two sets of populations: 'touchables' and 'untouchables'. The 'touchables' formed, what he called, 'the major community' and the untouchables 'a minor community'. The 'touchables' lived inside the village and the untouchables lived outside the village in separate quarters.

The touchables were economically the dominant community and commanded power; the untouchables were a 'dependent community' and a 'subject race of hereditary bondsmen'. The untouchables lived according to the codes laid down for them by the dominant 'touchable' major community. These codes laid guidelines regarding their habitations; the distance they ought to maintain from the 'Hindus'; the dress they should wear; the houses they should live in; the language they should speak; the names they should keep. They could not build houses having tiled roofs; they could not wear silver or gold jewellery [Moon 1979, 1989].

Though Ambedkar did refer to the Indian village and its casteist social structure in his earlier writings, most of his ideas on the subject were perhaps crystallised in response to the debates in the constituent assembly where many 'Hindu members' of the assembly made 'angry speeches' in "support of the contention that the Indian Constitution should recognise the village as its base of the constitutional pyramid of autonomous administrative units with its own legislature, executive and judiciary" (1989:19).

In his well known response to those who wanted village to be treated as the basic unit of Indian civilisation, he had said:

> I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India…What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? [Moon 994:62].

His concern obviously emanated from the standpoint of the 'untouchables', for whom recognition of the village as a unit of legal structure of India would have been 'a great calamity' [Moon 1989:19].

Though, as mentioned above, Ambedkar too was educated in the west, he was perhaps much more sceptical of western and colonial writings on the Indian society. While Gandhi and Nehru accepted the notion of 'village community' as a natural fact of Indian civilisation, Ambedkar perhaps saw it more in historical terms, as having been derived from the colonial/western imaginations of India, specifically from the writings of Sir Charles Metcalfe. He also thought that such a notion of village came to be accepted by the upper caste Hindus and the leaders of the independence movement because it projected them in a positive light. 'The average Hindu was always in ecstasy whenever he spoke of the Indian village. He regarded it as an ideal form of social organisation to which he believed there was no parallel anywhere in the world' [ibid:19].

The 'realistic picture' of village life was very different. For Ambedkar, the governing normative structure of the village was no way close to democracy. The village life was marked by experiences of exclusion, exploitation and untouchability. Not only did the members of upper/dominant castes make the untouchables live outside the village, in the ghetto, the untouchables were also excluded from most of the village festivities. 'When the whole village community was engaged in celebrating a general festivity such as Holi or Dasara, the untouchables must perform all menial acts which were preliminary to the main observance. These duties had to be performed without remuneration' [ibid: 22]

Apart from the experiences of near complete domination, the untouchables were also exploited and oppressed by the upper castes. They were not allowed to acquire wealth in form of land or cattle; they could not practice agriculture. Even as labourers they could not demand reasonable wages. They must submit to the rates fixed or suffer violence [ibid 23]. They lived a life that was full of humiliating experiences and dependency. There was only one source of livelihood open to them. It was 'the right to beg food from the Hindu farmers of the village. A large majority of the untouchables in the village were either servants or landless labourers. As village servants, they depended upon the Hindus for their maintenance, and had to go from door to door every day and collect bread or cooked food from the Hindus in return for certain customary services rendered by them to the Hindus' [ibid:24].

In his typically polemical style he concluded:

> This is the village republic of which the Hindus are so proud. What is the position of the untouchables in this Republic? They are not merely the last but are also the least…in this Republic there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is a very negation of Republic. The republic is an Empire of the Hindus over the untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the untouchables. The untouchables have no rights…They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called village republic, they are outside the Hindu fold [ibid: 25-26].

The 'Hindu domination' was not confined to the village. The local power/social structure was reflected at the macro/national level as well.

> From the capital of India down to the village level the whole administration is rigged by the Hindus. The Hindus are like the omnipotent almighty pervading all over the administration in all its branches having its authority in all its nooks and corners [ibid:104].

Ambedkar also contested the popular anthropological thesis about the ideological unity of the Hindu society that claims that ideologically the untouchables also subscribed to ideas of pollution and purity. Against the idea of 'cultural consensus' and 'reciprocity' as characteristics of the caste system, he draws an analogy between caste and class and looks at caste exactly in the terms in which Marx had talked about classes.

> The four varnas were animated by nothing but a spirit of animosity towards one another. There would not be slightest exaggeration to say that the social history of the Hindus is not merely of class struggle but class war fought with such bitterness that even the Marxists will find it difficult to cite parallel cases to match…It seems that the first class-struggle took place between the brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas on the one hand and the shudras on the other [ibid:193].

There is a remarkable continuity in his writings on the village. His critique of the village and caste system resembles quite closely those anthropological writings that tried to consciously look at caste from below [see, for example, Mencher 1975].

Conclusion

Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar were the three most important leaders of the modern India. The three leaders have been important not only because they played a critical role in India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule, and have become symbols of India's independent nationhood. Their legacy is also imbibed in the perspectives they articulated on India, its pasts and its possible futures. Their writings continue to be sources of inspiration for all those engaged in further consolidating Indian democracy in many different ways. Their legacies also reflect many of the dilemmas being faced by Indian society today.

The reformist vision of Gandhi, who wanted to construct a harmonious and self-contained village, uncorrupted by the modern life of the city and western technology continues to find its echoes in present times. It was only through the reconstruction of the village that India, for Gandhi, could recover its lost self and attain true freedom. Though not very widespread in the present-day India, his appeal remains quite powerful amongst those looking for alternatives to the conflict ridden, polluted and unlivable big cities. Apart from his followers on the Indian political scene, his ideas have also inspired many of the environmentalist writings and ideologies in other parts of the world.

Nehru's modernist vision of the village has been the source of much of the official policies and programmes of rural development initiated by the government of India after independence, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Though he shared with Gandhi the notions of traditional Indian village having been a 'community' in the past, for him class divisions, backwardness and ignorance marked the actual existing villages. The question, for him was not to revive the old 'community' but to develop the village and the agriculture through new technology and abolition

of 'outdated' structures of agrarian relations.

Having become the first prime minister of India, he had the opportunity of translating his thoughts into practice. The policies and programmes initiated by the government of free India did carry his vision. The implementation of land reform, although with limited success, and various programmes of rural development that took modern technology and new seeds to the cultivators have transformed Indian agriculture significantly.

Unlike Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar was a 'rebel'. He had neither the moral authority of Gandhi, nor the institutional power of Nehru. His influence, however, cannot be underestimated. Over the years, he has grown in stature and has emerged as a symbol of a potent dalit identity all-over India. His writings articulate a 'subaltern view' on the village. When looked at from below, from the standpoint of those who were made to live outside the village and were treated as untouchables, the so-called virtues of traditional living turn into oppressive structures. The hope for the dalits, therefore, did not lie in its revival/reconstruction, or for that matter, even in its development. Though he does not suggest it explicitly, Ambedkar would have perhaps voted against the very idea of village where it was impossible to escape from one's caste identity.

Before I conclude this paper, let me also point to the fact that notwithstanding their differences on the nature of Indian village, there are many ways in which the three seem to agree. As mentioned in the beginning of the paper, they all spoke about the village in civilisational terms. The Indian village had a pan-Indian structure. Irrespective of the differences of region, language or culture, villages were the same everywhere. Village, perhaps, was the only 'concrete' denominator of the Indian nationhood. However, I have also tried to show above that despite the use of categories like village popularised by the colonial discourses on India, their substantive notions of the empirical reality were shaped by a multitude of factors and the effects of their uses of such categories varied significantly. In other words, though orientalist/colonial categories provided them with conceptual resources; these categories could not completely limit/determine their politics and world-views.

Further, though their approaches were very different, they were all unhappy with the existing state of affairs in the rural settlements. The village life, they all professed, needed to be changed. They also seemed to agree on the point that it was difficult for the village to produce such a change from within. They all, in different ways, called for outside agents to intervene. Even Gandhi emphasised on the need of outside volunteers to go to the village and translate his ideas into reality. Nehru thought that the peasants were 'ignorant' 'foolish' and 'simple folks' [Nehru 1980:61]. They needed to be encouraged and motivated to change their ways of cultivation and learn modern techniques in order to grow more food. The initiative had to come from the state. Ambedkar had from the outset no stakes in the village. The future of dalits lay elsewhere, not in the 'den of ignorance'. EPW

Notes

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1 There have been only a few sociologists, such as Desai 1948; Moore 1966; Dhanagare 1982,

who have worked on the Indian nationalist movement.

2 For example, the early Indian sociologists like G S Ghurye [see Pramanick 1994; Upadhya 2002] and anthropologists like N K Bose [Sinha 1972] were deeply influenced by or were closely associated with the nationalist movement for independence.

3 Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar in Gujarat. His family had been in the town for a long time. His grandfather was the administrator of Porbandar. Nehru's parents too had been urbanites. He was born in 1889 in the north Indian town of Allahabad in a prosperous and distinguished family of Kashmiri brahmins. His father was successful lawyer and admirer of western culture. Bhimrao Ambedkar was born in a village of Maharashtra called Mhow in 1891. His family belonged to the untouchable caste of mahar and came from the village Ambavadekar, located in the Ratnagiri district. His father was employed in the British Army.

4 Marx's writings on the Indian village communities too reflected a similar understanding (see, for a critical exposition of Marx's views on the Indian village community Habib 1995).

5 Most of his ideas on the Indian village are available in the fifth volume of his writings and speeches published by Government of Maharashtra in 1989 (edited by V Moon), which were not easily available earlier.

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