

India's Villages in the 21st Century Revisits and Revisions

Surinder S. Jodhka
Edward Simpson

Study of village life has been one of the most persistent fields of social science research in India. It has been of interest to scholars from a wide range of disciplines: sociology/social anthropology, economics, political science, geography and even those writing fiction or exploring local music and folklores. These practitioners have documented various dimensions of their disciplinary interests in the village. However, their perspectives and intents have understandably differed. While some approach the village as 'a site' where specific questions relating to social, cultural, spatial, economic or political life of the common people may be observed and explored, others have studied it as a subject by itself, a cultural and social universe or a microcosm of the Indian society. The latter was particularly so with early village studies, carried out in different parts of the subcontinent by social anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s.

As is well known, it was the British colonial rulers who had popularized the idea that India lived in its villages and that the India's villages had a common design everywhere. Their notion of the Indian village also underlined the point that they had been static and independent of outside influence for a long period of time. These notions had been clearly drawn from the classical orientalist writings on the region. However, the "native" reformers and the mainstream nationalists endorsed most of these conceptions of India's past quite enthusiastically as it supported their claims of India's distinctive cultural past, and thus its nationhood and their struggle for its freedom.

At a time when every 9 out of 10 Indians lived there, the demographic weight of the rural would have also been a significant factor. If India was to develop and change, its villages needed to be transformed. And in order make it happen, they needed to be studied. Thus, the village was seen as an obvious and useful methodological entry point into the realities of Indian social, economic and political life. Thus, given its presumed significance for building an empirical social science of India and critical need for such research for working development plans after country's independence, the study of village life virtually became a passion with the social scientists during the decades of 1950s and 1960s.

It was in this context that the social anthropologists from across the world descended in villages across the subcontinent and began to produce ethnographic research on the subject. Sachin Chaudhary, the editor of a newly launched social science journal from Bombay, *The Economic Weekly*, encouraged them to publish short reports from their fieldwork in his journal. Many of them obliged and submitted short essays on their study villages, which were published in the journal. For a wider circulation M.N. Srinivas put together some of these essays in the form of a book with the title, *India's Villages*, in 1955. Several other research papers, monographs and edited volumes on the subject appeared around the same time and over the next two decades or so.

The rich empirical accounts presented in these field studies pointed to enormous diversities of castes and kinship systems across regions and communities; they questioned the widely held notion of autonomy and isolation of Indian village life. As elsewhere, rural settlements in the subcontinent had always been well integrated into the larger/regional economy and social networks. Caste was also not simply a ritual affair. Some explored the dynamics of power and mobility within the caste system through categories like that of the Dominant Caste, and *sanskritisation*. Some even wrote extensively on land relations and about the differences between men and women, even though they did not have the category of gender at their disposal.

By the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, ethnographic studies of a single village gave way to a more focussed analysis of subjects like the changing dynamics of agrarian relations, caste and rural power and the problems of rural poverty. Those studying rural social life tended to focus on a larger universe, a region or a cluster of villages. However, the critical turning point for the study Indian rural was the last decade of the 20th century. The shifts in Indian economic policy during the early 1990s began to marginalize rural life and its agrarian economy in the national imagination. Post-1990s India began to be imagined through the social and economic dynamics of its metropolitan centres with its expanding urban middle-classes.

But the rural has simply not gone away. Unlike the experience of the Western world, the growth of urban centres and urban populations in India has not been accompanied by a decline of the rural. Interestingly a much greater number of Indians live in rural areas today than they ever did before. Even though the relative strength of the urban has grown over the decades, the absolute numbers of rural populations has also been steadily growing. So is the case with the number of rural settlements. For example, the size of the rural population of India in 2011 was nearly 4 times of what it was in 1901. Even more interestingly during the first decade of this century, 2001-2011, even when the number of urban centres in India went up from 5161 to 7935, largely because of the conversion of rural settlements into urban centres, the number of settlements enumerated as 'rural' did not see any decline. Their numbers grew from 5,67,000 in 1901 to 6,38,588 in 2001, and further to 6,40,867 in 2011.

However, even when the rural flourishes demographically and spatially, its social and economic organization has seen many interesting and important changes over the past five or six decades. Perhaps the most important of these has been the steady decline of agriculture. Agriculture has declined in terms of its contribution to the national income, from more than half at the time of independence, to just around one-seventh today. Agriculture has also lost its charm in terms of its desirability as an occupation for younger generations across caste communities and regions of the country. Even when it presumably engages a majority of rural workers, it does not encompass the rural economy. A larger proportion of even rural incomes come from a variety of non-farm occupations.

Demographics are critical in democracies. The rural continues to matter, politically as well as socially, even though the larger balance of the Indian economy has seen some major shifts. The rural remains an important sphere of policy and political engagement with the Indian state and its political actors. However, the contemporary Indian village also presents empirical puzzles and conceptual challenges. Growing instances of farmers' suicides are not simply a reflection of declining incomes and

rising indebtedness among the cultivators. They are also a reflection of a complex social change and a rapid disintegration of local communities and social networks. Caste, land and economic disparities continue to matter but they can no longer be understood in the framework of *jajmani* relations, as the textbook view of village social and economic life would suggest. The Indian village today is also witness to an aspirational revolution, and the desire to move out of agriculture is likely to grow as the pace of its integration into the regional, the national and the global grows.

These ground realities of the emergent rural cannot be captured through simple and popular (populist!) formulations such as Bharat versus India; the narratives of “crises” or even the recently proposed formulation of “rurbanity”. Ground realities of the rural today and their patterns of change are not only complex but also extremely diverse, vertically as well as horizontally. The experience of the rural and its changing dynamics varies significantly across regions of the country. It also varies across caste, class and gender. Equally important is the fact that over the past decades, social science questions and perspectives have also seen many shifts. So have the policy preoccupations. It is in this context that mapping of the revisits and re-visions of the Indian villages acquire critical significance.

Over the past two decades or so a large number of scholars have been engaged with this exercise and many of them have published their work in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. This book brings together 14 essays, 13 of which were first published in the *EPW*. Some of the pieces have subsequently been modified and extended for publication in this volume. These essays represent regional diversities and a range of themes. They are all based on empirical research carried out around or after the turn of the century. A good number of them are re-studies of the villages studied by social anthropologists or economists during the last century. One of these also offers a reflective account of social anthropological engagements with the Indian village and the enterprise of revisits, which too draws from several village revisits.