

## **Visions in conflict: The village in the nationalist discourse**

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**Early colonial scholar-administrators preferred to describe Indian society as a sum total of self-sufficient 'little republics' – its villages. The view stemmed not from the prevailing constitution of the Indian society but because of the imperatives of consolidating an empire over an alien land. Post-Independence, the caste-view of Indian society overtook the village-view. The village declined in significance as labelling of social groups and recording of genealogies became absolutely central to administration. A look into the nationalists' points of view, both pre- and post-Independence, shows that the idea of the village varied as per different currents of thought and practice. The perceptions of Gandhi and Ambedkar, for instance, indicate how competing political agendas made a significant impact on the varied idealisations/criticisms of the Indian village. At the same time, all these views helped bring the village into the centre of ideological and political debate.**

**A**nthropologists and historians have convincingly demonstrated the increasing play of the nexus of colonial power and knowledge in the conceptualisation of Indian village (Dewey 1972; Heesterman 1985; Cohn 1997, 1999; Inden 1990). Indeed, the characterisation of the village as shorthand for Indian society acquired its exclusive and specific meaning only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the laborious work of a generation of early colonial scholar-administrators. For the latter, Indian society was but the sum total of its multitude of 'little republics'. This remained the dominant trope for the understanding of the village for the subsequent scholarship, though with minor variations in the use of metaphors. The village continued to be seen as a 'petty commonwealth' with near self-sufficiency and lasting where 'nothing else lasts'.

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On closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that the then prevalent focus on the village did not necessarily derive from the realities of the constitution of Indian society. Instead, it was predicated upon the *modus operandi* of the colonial state that necessarily viewed these realities in terms of its own imperatives of consolidating an empire over an alien land. As Heesterman (1985:181) notes, 'neither the vogue of the village, or the caste, seems to derive from any real Indian arrangement, but rather from the needs of the modern bureaucratic state as it was introduced at the beginning of the last [19<sup>th</sup>] century'. In due course, the concept of the village as an autonomous unit came into its own; it marvellously filled and legitimised the colonial need for a well-defined basic unit. The village made Indian territory intelligible and manageable to the colonial rulers. The latter could make sense of the village in the light of their own experiences as members of the English society employing categories they had historically known. In a way, the village heralded the colonial understanding of Indian territory as caste made Indian people amenable to British understanding. After all, not only had the people to be categorised and counted but also land to be mapped out in well-demarcated universal units. In any case, 'making village knowable was part of the enterprise of making it governable' (Smith 1985:156).

The relative salience of the categories employed – 'village' and 'caste' – has admittedly changed over time. After the introduction of the decennial census and the change in orientation of the colonial 'investigative modalities', the caste-view of Indian society seems to have overtaken the village-view (see Smith 1985; Cohn 1987, 1997). As the labelling of social groups and recording of genealogies became absolutely central to administration and knowledge of India, the village declined in significance. The village was no longer the 'official morphology at its prime' (Smith 1985: 155). However, what concerns us in this paper is the appropriation of the village view of Indian society by Indians themselves and the ways in which the village in India became pregnant with nationalist imagery and meanings – an archaic and primary nucleus of Indian society, an autonomous politico-administrative unit and an economically self-sufficient entity. While examining the place of the village in the nationalist vision/s, we attempt to trace the salient historical continuities across colonial and nationalist discourses. By looking at the inherent fault-lines of the nationalist project, we lay down the contours of the idea of the village as it came to inform different currents of nationalist thought and practice. We shall see how the competing political agendas of the different groups and forces had a significant impact on the varied idealisations/criticisms of the Indian village.

## THE VILLAGE IN THE NATION AND THE NATION IN THE VILLAGE

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the village, along with becoming the standardised object of administration, also became the site of policy debate and political struggle between the colonial rulers and the nationalist intelligentsia. Nationalists made the village the touchstone of the efficacy of colonial policies and the validity of the imperial claims of welfare and progress. Interestingly, the image of the village community was rendered unfit for use as radical propaganda in Europe and it ceased to be a much-charged political figure there. In India, precisely at the same time, it raised its head as an emotionally powerful political symbol (Dewey 1972). For the Indian nationalists, advocacy for the Indian village became the ultimate touchstone of patriotism.

In the nationalist literature, we find two principal themes: The urgent need to preserve the basic constitution of the Indian village, and the all-pervasive lament over the disintegration of the village under the colonial rule. These twin themes ignited many nationalist minds and came to serve the nationalist cause in considerable measure. As part of the overall rejection of colonialism, the nationalists had to have a fundamentally different view of the long historical trajectory of Indian society that had preceded its subjugation to the colonial rule. In their nostalgia for a better past, the nationalists expectedly gravitated towards the myth of a pristine village community. Contra Marx, the inability of the village to historically transform itself was not seen as a marker of backwardness. Rather, this immutability became the sign of its cultural confidence and civilisational strength. By refusing to bow to the vicissitudes of political history, the village showed its inherent capacity for resistance. And, it was this resistance to get bogged down by the tumultuous historical currents that saved it from decay and dissolution, notwithstanding the might of the invaders and colonisers. The point is that the same set of characteristics that were deemed to be responsible for the stagnation and immutability of the Indian village came to be seen as signs of its vitality and institutional endurance by the nationalists.

In the nationalist thinking, nationhood survived in the village as the latter was left unaffected by foreign rule owing to the innate virtues of its constitution. Through a series of ideological manoeuvres, the quintessential Indian village came to play an important role in the nationalist thought and practice. So profoundly did the image of a traditional India (composed of a myriad of self-contained village republics) stamp itself upon the

consciousness of the educated populace of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the influence of modernity was read invariably as a disintegrative one. Nationalists would ask: Had not the traditional forms of local self-government resting on the village panchayat and the village headman been rapidly drained of life by the judicial and administrative machinery of the modern state? Had not the monetisation of the land-revenue demand and the pressure for cash cropping been followed by an invasion of the closed village economy by foreign manufactures with the resultant overthrow of traditional handicrafts? Had not the novel introduction of modern proprietary title deprived the peasant of his essential property in the soil, and in law or practice reduced him to a mere tenant or labourer of an outside purchaser, usually an urban moneylender? The Indian nationalists of different hues and persuasions shared these simple, though powerful, ideas alike (see Stokes 1978:267).

Nationalists held colonial rule responsible for the destruction and eventual disappearance of the social cohesion and harmony within the village (some British officers too held this view). The introduction and gradual penetration of colonial land and revenue policies disrupted the mutuality and harmony of the traditional Indian village. While tearing asunder many defining features of the village, the institutions and agencies of the colonial state unleashed disruptive forces in the village. Cooperation gave way to competition as consensus was overshadowed by conflicts. Under colonial duress, the commercial market-oriented agricultural practices replaced the 'moral economy of the peasant'. The nationalist rhetoric, and its articulation in the form of *swadeshi* ideology, is replete with charges of this order.

Even as the British 'invention' of caste relegated the category of the Indian village to the backseat, the nationalist thinking remained glued to the supposed virtues of the village, precisely those very virtues that the colonial administrator-scholars had discovered. The demands of an incipient national identity necessitated the projection of the village as the repository of civilisational ideals of the Indian nation. Indian nationalists resurrected the village as a compelling sign of 'traditional' India. The true India now lived in its villages. The village became the epitome of India's 'golden past' with its suggestions of egalitarianism (overt or covert), primitive democracy and pristine harmony. In ideological terms, the village, with all its inflated virtues, provided a counterfoil to the much-criticised hierarchic and undemocratic notions of caste. Nationalists could now, at least, take pride in some of the indigenous institutions. They could also assert that all is not wrong with India and her past. The point is not whether or not they

went overboard in offering paeans to the village. What matters more is that the village provided them with a sturdy confidence in their inherited legacy as a 'nation' and thus served a vital ideological function in the course of nationalist movement. Not surprisingly, Indian nationalists appropriated this idealised village, as they saw in these communities evidence of the antiquity of an indigenous concept of democracy, socialism and much more that suited their ideological palate.

There were many factors behind the nationalist appropriation of the village (Ludden 1999:6-17). The urban middle classes, which were championing the nationalist cause, needed the village to bolster their claims to be the true representatives of the Indian nation. By making the village the site of public policy debates, they could bridge the cultural gap between their own urbanity and the rural, rustic tradition of the village. It was immaterial to them whether they had known the village personally or not. The village occupied a pride of place in their public discussions and formulations. Ludden rightly asserts that nationalist debates should be looked at in terms of the evolution of national ideas about the historical substance of the nation and its future, rather than the direct experience and observation of the village.

Nationalist leaders shared with Europeans an urban identity, alienated from the village. At the same time, imperial ideology lumped all the natives together as native subjects, whether they were from the village or not. In this scenario, the growth of political nationality depended on the efforts to bring the village and the town together in the abstract opposition of the 'Indian' and the 'British'. This, in fact, was one of the important reasons for the success of the Indian national movement under the leadership of Gandhi. It enabled Indian nationalists to produce a distinctively national sense of village inside the British Empire.

The entry of the village into the nationalist discourse protected the cultural status of the urban middle classes by uniting them with the villagers in their opposition to colonialism. As a literate voice for illiterate people, a national intelligentsia could present the village to the public and represent the rural masses. As self-professed spokespersons of the imaginary nation, they entrusted to themselves the task of translating (vernacular) village tradition into the (English) language of modernity. By virtue of these mediations, the nationalist voices succeeded in making the problems of the country into a critique of colonial policies. The village India was now an archetypal colonial problem. By holding colonialism responsible for the problems of village India, such as famines and poverty, low agricultural

production and indebtedness, the nationalist intelligentsia not only challenged the colonial domination but also imparted a distinctively nationalist interpretation to the idea of the village. Educated leaders of the country could now speak for the country as a whole, the village included.

Subsequently, the village came to be represented in a set of iconic images in novels, short stories, plays, poetry and other related genres of nationalist literature (Bhalla and Bumke 1992; Pandey 2003). By the 1920s, academic studies of the village too came to be institutionalised, signalling the growing hold of the village over the nationalist imagination (Ranade 1926, Majumdar 1929, Shukla 1937). Using the broadly accepted theory of the indigenous village India (stable and coherent), many economists sought to bolster village tradition while making villagers richer at the same time (Mukherjee 1916, 1946). To make modernisation and development more authentically and effectively Indian appeared to be their prime concern.

Nationalist historiography was not far behind. Historians like Beni Prasad, H. C. Raychaudhury, K. P. Jayaswal, R. C. Majumdar and Radhakumud Mookerji preferred to see the origin of the modern nation in ancient India. Although their work did not concentrate on the village as such, their perspective indirectly helped consolidate the myth of the ancient Indian village (Sen 1973, Prakash 1990). These writings put forward an idea of the village that is symbolic of the patriotic struggles in British India. R. C. Dutt's *Economic History of India under the Early British Rule* (1960), which became a major source of nationalist intellectual inspiration, is a case in point.

Even Jawaharlal Nehru conceived of a traditional agrarian system of which collective or co-operative village formed the linchpin. He saw the cooperative spirit of the village as pre-figuring a socialist India. Gradually, the idea of a traditional village council gained ground; ignoring the fact that panchayat was no village forum but functioned exclusively in a segmentary capacity as a caste council (Inden 1990:146-47).

Closely related to the idea of a harmonious village, nay, its very basis – the *jajamani* system – became a picture of reciprocity and equality that facilitated localised exchange of goods and services through a series of transactions among peasants, artisans and other service castes. This exemplary social distribution of local production was toasted as a unique feature of village India. Even though historians like Altekar (1927) and Kosambi (1956) questioned the closed character and immutable nature of the pre-colonial village community while referring to its incorporation into a more encompassing state framework, modern attributes like democracy

and equality were bestowed on the Indian village unabashedly. Very often, it was a case of the ideal modelling reality (Béteille 1980:110-11).

The notion of the village has always carried the inflections of contestatious political ideals and ideologies. These contestations come out most strikingly in the context of Constituent Assembly debates embodying inner dissonances of the nationalist agenda. Indeed, the content of the dyad (the nation and the village that Gandhi had so assiduously built during the heyday of Indian nationalism) underwent profound metamorphoses in these debates. This is not to deny that the 'village' remained a core category through which most of the nationalist leaders conceptualised or thought of the 'traditional' Indian social life, notwithstanding disagreements and differences in their ideological orientations or political agenda. True, unlike the colonial administrators, the nationalist leadership did not see the village simply as constituting the 'basic unit' of Indian civilisation. For the nationalists, the village 'was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation' (Béteille 1980:108). For most of them, the village represented the 'real' India, the nation that needed to be retrieved, liberated and transformed. In this sense, they shared an ideological affinity with the European romantics. As Inden (1986:432) remarks:

"Certainly the most important of the romantic and idealist writings from 1875 to Independence are those not of western scholars but of many of the Indian nationalists, including Gandhi and Nehru. Since the rulers of India by and large held views that converged with the positivist interpretations of Mill and Smith, it is no surprise to find that the nationalists found themselves keeping company with the members of the loyal opposition within intellectual circles."

Though there was virtual agreement that the village represented the core of the traditional social order of India, variations on both the merits of the traditional Indian village life and its place in the future India of the nationalist visions were clearly discernible. Yet, these visions had more to do with India's past and future than contemporary documentation of the village life. Nowhere does one come across the portrayal of the village as a concrete reality having regional variations and historical specificities. The nationalist recasting of the village as a grand civilisational entity obviously did not brook such academic questions. Not only did this influence state policies for development and change in independent India, but it has also become part of the Indian common sense. In contemporary times, one sees the

nationalist imprint of the village in a variety of new social movements as well as voluntary and non-governmental organisations broadly inspired by Gandhian ideology (Jodhka 2002:3345).

Thus, through a series of ideological and political moves, the village was rendered as part of the nation. Since Independence, the village has also been a template of national development. The nationalist ideas concerning the village have been expressed through latter-day efforts to resurrect village institutions, land reforms and rural development. The Gandhian school, in particular, saw a revival of the golden past in the Panchayati Raj institutions and other measures of village development in the post-colonial period. Mendelsohn (1993:807) put it succinctly: “The later nationalist Indian version of this [village] myth took the form of nostalgia for a supposed village panchayat or deliberative body in which everybody (or at least all men) took part”.

### **GANDHI’S INVOCATION OF THE IDEAL VILLAGE**

Arguably, the myth of Indian village became central to the Indian nationalist’s view of the past (Dumont 1970; Cohn 1987, 1997). This myth found its most potent articulation in the politics of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The marked change in the social character of Indian national movement since the early 1920s shows Gandhi’s concern for the village and the villagers (Chandra 1979). Thereafter, his entire political life was dedicated to charting out a detailed blueprint for an India which would be a comity of self-reliant and largely politically autonomous villages. The translation of this myth as the basis for political action was called variously ‘Gram Swaraj’, ‘Gramotthan’ and ‘Swavavlamban’. Moreover, the ideas associated with these terms, which are evocative of a golden past when India was a land of pristine village communities, came to influence the process of the making of the Indian Constitution as well.

Even after Independence, the Indian nationalists found it hard to resist the village-bound sentimentality. Jayaprakash Narayan’s “plea for the reconstruction of Indian polity” is yet another instance of the articulation of the nationalist myth of the autonomous village community (Narayan 1956). This also shows how Gandhi’s ideas had seeped into some of the political doctrines of post-Independence India. According to Narayan, “the village community, expressing the two ideals of the voluntary limitation of wants and of unanimity in social and political views, should be preserved and strengthened as a fundamental element in the Indian political system” (cited in Bottomore 1972:107). Much later, the emergence of the ‘Bharat



versus India' debate underlines new aspirations regarding the state-village relationship (Sharad Joshi 1985, 1988). Thus, the idea of the village traverses a wide terrain from being synonymous with India itself, nay, the authentic and real India, to a political camouflage for defending the interests of the rural bourgeoisie (Frankel 1978, Rudolph and Rudolph 1987, Bardhan 1996).

It would not be off the mark to argue that a heightened sense of nationalist zeal and fervour came to inform rural development in post-Independence India. Rural development was considered an essential item on the agenda of post-colonial nation-building. The fanfare associated with the launch of the Community Development Programme (CDP) is a case in point. More importantly, even though the Gandhian ideas could not form the bedrock of the Indian nation, their rhetorical sway was too strong to wither away, notwithstanding Ambedkar's forceful advocacy to the contrary (Chatterjee 1986). Expectedly, Gandhi, the most illustrious nationalist, believed that under colonial domination, the real India lived on in the villages. In this traditional habitat he sought the key to establishing a modern society after Independence. For him, national liberation was an empty rhetoric unless efforts were made to free the rural masses from conditions of poverty, literacy, disease and squalor. He desired a drastic transformation of village social life and substantial delegation of political power to villages. The Gandhian programme of rural reconstruction was based on the conceptualisation of the village as a collectivity based on fundamental equality and cooperation. He also believed that the members of the village had a tendency to be free from self-interest.

The leadership of the Congress movement, though already internally divided on the issue, repeatedly advocated a post-colonial development policy of village restoration in accordance with Gandhi's principles. The subject came up for discussion in the Constituent Assembly where some members wanted the village to be the basic unit in the new social and political order. Ambedkar would have none of this and silenced his critics by pointing out that the Indian village was and always had been a den of iniquity and cesspool of factionalism. His intervention, however, did not go unheeded as the Constituent Assembly had to yield to the overwhelming realism of his vision. Nonetheless, many members of the Constituent Assembly were sufficiently stirred by Gandhian ideas to plead for the nationalist village. For example, T. Prakasam participated in the debate by saying:

"Sir, a very piquant situation was created by not making the village republic or the village unit as the real basis of the Constitution. It must be

acknowledged on all hands that this is a construction which is begun at the top and which is going down to the bottom. What is suggested in this direction by Dr. Rajendra Prasad himself was that the structure must begin from the foundations and it must go up. That, Sir, is the constitution which the departed Mahatma Gandhi indicated and tried to work up for nearly thirty years" (quoted in deSouza 2001:2).

Gandhi's invocation of the Indian village, though, is part of his larger nationalist critique of the modern industrial West. For him, it was more than a strategic ploy to increasingly incorporate the masses of the peasantry in the Indian national movement. Village *swaraj* was as much a centrepiece of Gandhi's vision of an independent India as a presumed basis for an alternative civilisational-moral order. Broadly speaking, Gandhi posited the idea of the village to accomplish three interrelated aims: To establish the equivalence of the Indian civilisation with the West, which made him counterpoise the village to the city and presented the village life as a critique of and an alternative to the modern culture and civilisation; to effectively articulate his concern with the actual existing villages and on ways and means of reforming them and; to present the Indian village in an essentially futuristic framework as the potential core of an alternative civilisation (Jodhka 2002). For Gandhi, the village was to be the locus of genuine freedom. To be fair to Gandhi, his idealisation of the village followed from his fundamental opposition to the parliamentary order. To quote Gandhi's own words:

"My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation, and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theater, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply... As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis... the government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat... here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom".

Admittedly, Gandhi sought equilibrium between city and village as he was convinced that a complete harmony between village and cities would form a basis for the eradication of such social evils as unemployment, class distinctions and the like. He was at his reiterative best when he said the

real India was to be found not in her towns but in her “700,000 villages”. This is not to say that he was oblivious of the pathetic conditions prevalent in the villages of his times. Not only did he agree with Lionel Curtis’ description of an Indian village as “a collection of unsanitary dwellings constructed in a dunghill”, he also offered to give more details about the neglect of villages.

What distinguishes Gandhi from his contemporary compatriots such as Nehru and Ambedkar is the conviction that the deplorable condition of the Indian village was the historical outcome of foreign rule and continuous neglect rather than an original state of affairs. His prophecy – “if the villages perish, India will perish too” – was more to stress the great importance of the village in the Indian social system than idealise and romanticise the then-prevailing village life as alleged by many of his critics (Unnithan 1979:80). Had Gandhi been an Arcadian romantic and a Luddite, he would not have invested so much of his political energy for the reformation of the Indian villages. He held the view that prosperity of a permanent and fair nature can be secured through the proper development of villages. Thus Gandhi, “the born democrat”, wanted to build the structure of pure democracy “inch by inch” directly from below. He wanted to make each village “a complete republic independent of its neighbours for vital wants, and yet interdependent or many others in which dependence is a necessity”. He wanted to present the model of real village government, to depict his ideal of a perfect democracy based upon individual freedom and at the same time upon collective and co-operative action. He was honest enough to admit that the conditions he prescribed apply to the ideal village of his conception, and that it might take a lifetime to model such a village. He asked any lover of true democracy and village life to take up such work and to start by being the village scavenger, spinner, watchman, medicine man and schoolmaster simultaneously. As he said, “if all Indian villages could come up to the ideal, India would be free from most of its worries” (*ibid*:106-08).

However, Moore (1966: 374) argues that what Gandhi sought was a return to an idealised past. The Indian village community, purged of its more obviously degrading and repressive features, such as untouchability, provided him with a blueprint of that idealised past. For Moore, “fundamentally, the notion of village democracy is a piece of romantic Gandhian nostalgia that has no relevance to modern conditions. The pre-modern Indian village was probably as much of a petty tyranny as a petty republic; certainly the modern one is such” (*ibid*:394).

Be that as it may, after Independence, a certain nationalist genuflection to the Gandhian vision came to inform the introduction of the CDP and various other measures of rural development. These programmes were meant to cater to the Gandhian constituency, even though their essential import was different. In a way, the CDP is the official version of the Gandhian constructive programme, omitting some of its important provisions for social reform and with a considerable admixture of techniques gained from the rural extension service and industrialisation of the United States (*ibid*:208). Rather than exploring the disjunction between government policies and Gandhian teachings, suffice it to say that Gandhi implanted the Indian village in the nationalist imagination in a way no other leader had done till then.

### **AMBEDKAR'S RIPOSTE**

For Ambedkar, Gandhi's vision romanticised the village, though Gandhi had made it amply clear that the village he was talking about was a potentiality – “a village of my dreams” – and not the existing village life. Ambedkar could not see this potentiality. For him, the village was the embodiment of repression and no freedom could emanate from there. He was vehement in his opposition to the Gandhi's ideal village:

“It is said that the new constitution should have been ...built upon village panchayats and District Panchayats...they just want India to contain so many village governments. The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic... I hold that the village republic have been the ruination of India. I am therefore surprised that those who condemn provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as the unit” (cited in deSouza 2001:6-7).

For Ambedkar, Indian village becomes a test case for probing the position of the ‘Untouchables’ under the Hindu social order for “the Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order”. He asserts (Rodrigues 2002:323):

“One can see there [in the village] the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organisation to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world. It is claimed

to be a special contribution to the theory of social organisation for which India may well be proud of.”

According to Ambedkar, Hindus, having an unflinching belief in the Indian village as an ideal piece of social organisation, were no less than fanatics. It is this fanaticism which have made them dominate the proceedings of the Indian Constituent Assembly by way of making angry speeches in support of the contention that the Indian village be made the base of the constitutional pyramid of autonomous administrative units with its own legislature, executive and judiciary. From the point of view of the Untouchables, there could not have been a greater calamity. He exclaims: “Thank God the Constituent Assembly did not adopt it. Nevertheless the Hindus persist in their belief that the Indian village is an ideal form of social organisation” (*ibid*:234).

Ambedkar takes pains to prove the novelty of the idea of the ideal village: “This belief of the Hindus is not ancestral belief, nor does it come from the ancient past”. He is convinced that such idealisations have been borrowed from Metcalfe. While quoting Metcalfe at length, he argues that, since the idealistic description of the Indian village came from the high-placed members of the governing class, the Hindus felt flattered and adopted his view as a welcome compliment. It comes easily to subject people (Hindus in this case) to internalise the judgement of their masters and further degrade their own intelligence or understanding. By going whole hog in lapping up the eulogies of the Indian village, the Hindus have merely exhibited the weakness common to all subject people. Viewed thus, the idealistic view of the Indian village is the outcome of the joint efforts of the foreigners and the caste Hindus.

Ambedkar asserts that the Indian village is not a single social unit. In realistic terms, it consists of castes – Touchables and Untouchables. One has to distinguish between majority and minority members of the village. Furthermore, those living inside the village and the ones outside the village in separate quarters cannot be said to belong to the same unitary village. In short, an economically strong and powerful community and a poor and dependent one; a ruling race and a subject race of hereditary bondsmen characterise the Indian village (*ibid*:235, 325). He castigates the Indian village in an acerbic tone:

“In this [village] 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 the very negation of a republic. It is a republic of the

Touchable, by the Touchables and for the Touchables. 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" (*ibid*:330-31).

What emerges from Ambedkar's writings is his deep conviction that the Indian village is essentially a Hindu village. Very simply, it is a Hindu village because Untouchables have no rights: "They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and ... because they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle" (*ibid*:331). Ambedkar investigates the terms of associational life on which the Touchables and Untouchables live in an Indian village and reaches the conclusion that in every village the Touchables have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow (*ibid*:325).

## CONCLUSION

Although Gandhian ideas of the village could not become part of the dominant constitutional ethos, their very presence could not be ignored. The inclusion of the provision for village panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution and the implementation of CDP in the early 1950s on a massive scale can be seen as instances of nationalist genuflection to Gandhi. In terms of pragmatic policies and programmes, however, none of the aforementioned polar opposite points of view could ideologically hegemonise the *statist* treatment of the Indian village. In fact, it was Nehru's modernist vision of the village that became the source of the much of official policies and programmes of rural development initiated by the Government after independence, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s.

Interestingly, Nehru shared with Gandhi the notions of traditional Indian village having been a community in the past and, thus, socially and politically, his ideas were pretty much the same as those of Gandhi. While sharing the same ground and the broad philosophical approach with Gandhi, Nehru, however, was quite clear in his approach that economically the village of future India could not be made self-sufficient. For him, class divisions, backwardness and ignorance marked the actual existing villages and these ills were too serious to give rise to any question of the revival of the traditional village or necessitate any large-scale reconstruction along traditional lines (Jodhka 2002:3350).

In general terms, Nehru's and Gandhi's views concerning the village could be placed on a continuum thanks to certain similarities of orientation and

approach. Both of them looked at the village as a civilisational form, as a pan-Indian construct and as a denominator of nationhood. Both of them advocated the need, even urgency for change in actually existing village life. Also, they felt that forces of change are not going to be endogenous, that is, coming from within the village. As they understood the near impossibility of endogenous change, they advocated for outside agents for change. In the case of Gandhi, volunteers, the selfless rural reconstruction workers, personified the outside agency of change, while Nehru looked forward to and energised the all-powerful state to be the harbinger of change in village India. It was only Ambedkar who had no stakes in the village and thus did not trouble himself much about the future agencies of change in the Hindu-Indian village.

In Ambedkar, one finds an altogether different characterisation of the Indian village. A village that has excluded 'untouchables' historically and it is impossible to escape from one's caste identity is but a Hindu village. To him, the very idea of the village is repulsive. As a consequence, revival, reconstruction, or for that matter development, is not an issue in Ambedkar's conception of the village. Village is simply despicable and an immediate decline of this highly repressive social entity will only fasten the pace of decay of the Hindu social order. To the extent that village is the working plant of Hindu social order, any frontal attack on that order will necessarily mean an attack on the village and all that it stands for.

In retrospect, the Indian Constitution seems to have derived more from Ambedkar's critique of the village than from Gandhian utopia. The latter has failed to die down, though, as the theory and practice of Gandhians and neo-Gandhians continue to lend voice to the Gandhian vision of village reconstruction. Paradoxically, both Gandhi and Ambedkar based their understanding of the village in the overall orientalist matrix. Whereas Gandhi stressed the ideal of a self-sufficient and unchanging village, Ambedkar laid bare its hidden underbelly. As their political agendas fundamentally differed, they put their understanding to different political uses. Yet, as Jodhka (*ibid*:3352) argues, they could also transcend the orientalist/colonial categories in their quest for emancipatory politics.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the nationalist euphoria hardly allowed the nationalists a critical space to question their own dependence on earlier colonial accounts that stressed cohesion and harmony. Nationalists had accepted the portrayals of the village contained in these accounts as an article of faith. The nationalist's formulations of the village did not highlight their direct knowledge and experience of the village life. Rather, their

sense of the village rested firmly on the official knowledge. In this sense, we can safely say that old orientalist and official knowledge constructed by the British offered the requisite intellectual scaffolding for the nationalist inflation of the alleged virtues of the village.

At its most extreme, the nationalist position held that the pre-British village community, destroyed by the colonial administrative and economic frontiers, had not merely been an integrated but also a happy community. It was also asserted that it had been a republican community, and this assertion was usually interpreted to mean that it had been a democratic community (Mookerjee 1936).

In the ultimate analysis, both colonial and nationalist constructions of the village were too ideologically charged and politically motivated to stoop down to the level of empirical enquiries. Yet, both the colonial scholar-administrators and the nationalist intelligentsia rendered a great service to the future scholarly investigations of the village by placing it at the centre of many ideological and political debates of the day. As a consequence, they imparted to the village an intellectual salience that it did not have earlier. In a way, the colonial and nationalist renditions of the village paved the way for the later, methodologically distinctive and fieldwork-based studies of the village. □

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