



On a Status Quaestionis: A Literature Survey on Where Village Studies Stands Today

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper makes a brief survey of various kinds of descriptions that are available about Indian villages. These descriptions consist of early European descriptions about the administration in Indian villages and sociological descriptions that talk about the role of caste in shaping occupational patterns and hierarchy. The paper presents a case to reexamine and rethink about these descriptions as they are founded on the way Europeans experienced Indian society by and large. It also argues for a reexamination of the sociological studies of Indian villages as the recent studies and research on Indian culture can potentially provide framework to build alternative descriptions about Indian villages as alternatives to existing stories in a way that appeals to our own experience rather than keeping Europe's experience as a framework.

Keywords: Indian Village Studies, Western Theoretical Frameworks, Eurocentric Perspective, Structural-functionalism, Caste System and Village Community, Indian alternative Frameworks, Methodological Approaches

Background

Over the last two centuries, researchers in the fields of anthropology and sociology in India have focused on understanding village communities in India. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the British government started formally studying Indian villages. In their attempt to do so, they seem to have raised questions as follows: What makes some communities into a village community in India? What is its structure and what is its function? How far has village studies succeeded in addressing these questions is a question for research in itself. Nevertheless, one can safely assume that the literature produced so far, guided by these questions, shall provide a reasonably appropriate picture of how Indian villages, their communities look like. Therefore, in order to begin to reflect about Indian village communities, a careful examination of the status of literature of the discipline is worth considering. In this background, this paper makes an attempt to put together various ideas and arguments around the available descriptions on Indian villages. Having done a survey of literature, the paper will raise some questions about some issues therein which require the attention of the scholars for further examination.

It is possible to trace discussions about villages all the way back to the early 19th century, despite the fact that the study of villages did not become an official social science discipline until the middle of the 20th century. We need, therefore, to take a detour to see how the picture about Indian villages began to be painted.

1.Earlier Accounts of Indian Village Communities

Beginning in the early 1800s, European officials conducted surveys in Indian villages. The social conditions of the communities that were being studied were the primary focus of those studies. These surveys were conducted across a variety of communities. That is to say, the central issue was to understand how Indian village communities were structured. Those engaged in this survey were British officials such as Thomas Munro, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilkes, Elphinstone, Sir Charles T. Metcalfe, and others. Let us see what picture of the village arises out of the descriptions of these British administrators.

1.1. On Administration in the Village

There have been multiple authorities working in different regions of India who had the task of taking care of village administration. It is not uncommon therefore that they were interested to know how Indian villages took care of themselves in terms of local administration. The following citations show what they found in Indian villages regarding local administration.

The following is the observation made by Thomas Munro, a British officer who was working in the Madras Presidency at the beginning of the 19th century regarding the villages that were located in that province:

Under this **simple form of municipal government**, the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial. (Dutt, 2007)

Munro's account clearly suggests that in the eyes of Munro, it appears that the internal operations of the village are carried out systematically like that of a municipal government. Further somewhere else, he also says:

Every village with its twelve Agagandees, as they are denominated, is a **petty commonwealth**, with its Mokuddum, Potail, Rapod, Reddy, or chief inhabitant at the head of it, and India is a great assemblage of such commonwealths. (Dutt, 2007)

The preceding sentence by Munro not only refers to every village as a small commonwealth, but it also states that every village had a chief who was in charge of the people living there. In addition, the villagers sought help from their chief when they faced problems (Dutt, 2007). In this way, Munro sees a certain system in the way an Indian village takes care of itself.

We also come across Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilkes, who was a contemporary of Thomas Munro, engaging in a conversation regarding this subject. In addition to serving as the Political Resident at the Mysore Palace, he was a British officer who served in the Mysore Presidency office. He gives the following description of the village:

Every Indian village is, and appears always to have been, in fact, a separate **community or republic**... (Wilks, 1996)

Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilkes's description of the village points at the idea that the village was a separate community or republic. What did Wilkes mean by that? He means to say that a village is a separate community or a republic in the sense that each village consists of a group of twelve key members who wield power, with the Potail serving as the head of this group. India is a collection of these villages. According to Wilkes, Potail holds the power in the village, as he is the collector, the magistrate, and the head farmer there. In addition to this, Wilkes claims that the Patel family is the center of power in the village. In this sense, he too sees some form of local governance in place in the village.

A British officer by the name of Elphinstone was also employed in the Bombay Presidency at the time. In his "Report of the Territories Conquered by the Peshwa," which he submitted to the Governor General in October of 1819, he makes the following statements regarding the village that was under his administration:

In whatever point of view we examine the **Native Government in the Deccan**, the first and most important feature is the division into villages or townships. (Dutt, 2007)

Even when we consider Elphinstone's description of the villages that were located within the Bombay Presidency, it is evident that there was a management system that was found within the villages themselves. He is aware that there is a system that would be able to fulfill all of the requirements of the people living in the village. This system is also referred to as native government by him.

In the year 1830, Sir Charles T. Metcalfe was the individual who was responsible for the administration of North India. During his tenure, he visited a number of villages in the northern region of India. In the same way as the three British officers who came before him and those who came after them, he paints a picture of the villages of North India as having characteristics that are similar to those of every other village in India:

"The **village communities are little republics**, having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations." (Dutt, 2007)

Using the metaphor of "little republics" Metcalfe spoke of rural communities. In addition to this, the villagers claim that they have everything they desire within themselves and are almost dependent on the relationships they have with people from outside their community. In other words, this indicates that it appears that the rural communities have their own internal governance system.

Putting it all together, the village is referred to as a municipal government, petty commonwealth, little republic, or native government under a variety of names, including local government, in all of the descriptions of British officials, which range from Thomas Munro to Metcalfe.

If these British officers found governing systems in Indian villages, did they also see officials who ran the governance? It appears that they did also see administration being run by officials in the villages. Let us see what they have to say about these officials.

1.2. On Village Administrative Officials as Seen by the British

The British officials have already provided us with descriptions of the villages that are located in various parts of India, and we have already seen those descriptions. According to these descriptions Indian villages appeared to have a governing system. But who ran these systems? Were there officials who ensured smooth running of the systems? What kind of decisions did they make to implement this system? Assuming that the descriptions provided by the British officials are accurate, let us investigate the individuals who were a part of that system.

An officer in the Madras Presidency named Thomas Munro, upon observing the well-organized way of life of the people living in the village as well as the methodical approach to the management of the village, referred to the village as a straightforward form of municipal government. According to what we have seen, Munro referred to the village as a petty commonwealth after observing the orderliness of the lives of the people living in rural areas as well as the orderliness of the administrative system. Additionally, as a component of that:

Every village with its twelve Agagandeas, as they are denominated, is a petty commonwealth, with its Mokuddum, Potail, Rapod, Reddy or chief inhabitant at the head of it, and India is a great assemblage of such commonwealths. (Dutt, 2007)

According to the argument presented above, every village is a petty commonwealth that is led by a Patel, Reddy, or Gurikar and consists of a group of twelve prominent members known as the Twelve Ayandeas.

As we have previously seen, Wilkes referred to the village as a distinct community or republic while he was the president of the Mysore Presidency. Looking closer, we can see that he names the people who run the show in the village's administrative capacity. In other words, Wilkes enumerates the various ways in which the villagers managed their daily lives. The administration and day-to-day operations of the village are greatly influenced by a number of individuals. Judges and administrators can be Mumdil, Gaud, Patel, or Mukkuddan; the person in charge of keeping records can be Putwari or Shanbog; and the person in charge of the tank can be Sthulwar. The Neergunti oversees even water distribution, while the astrologer provides guidance on crop tending schedules. Pottery supplies earthenware containers, while blacksmithing and carpentry produces agricultural tools and domestic implements. Simple jewelry can be made by a goldsmith, washed by a washerman, and styled by a barber. In exchange for their labor, these 12 individuals get allotted specific plots of land or arable land (Wliks, 1996). Wliks explains that villagers are considered a powerful social class with unique abilities, despite the fact that they do a wide range of manual labor. This indicates that there is a recognized authority within the village and that there is a system of governance in place.

Also included are the incharges of the villages in the Bombay province, such as Elphinstone, Thomas Munro, and Mark Wliks. As we have seen, Elphinstone acknowledged the village's ability to provide for all of its residents' needs by referring to it as the Native government. He considers village communities to be the most subordinate kind of state. He further states;

The head of each village is the Patil, who has under him an assistant, called a Chaugulla, and a clerk called a Kulkarni. There are, besides, twelve village officers, well known by the name of the Bara Baloti. These are the astrologer, the priest, the carpenter, barber, &c., but the only ones who are concerned in the administration of the government are the Sonar or Potdar, who is silversmith and assayer of money, and the Mhar, who, in addition to various other important duties, acts as watchman to the village. (Dutt, 2007).

Several distinct sets of duties existed in the Bombay province's rural communities, as described by Elphinstone. In addition, he sees that distinct roles were assigned to particular people, and various kinds of work were categorized accordingly.

According to each of these descriptions, there is a group of local officials who are accountable for the administration of the village. This is something that is common to all of these descriptions.

Further, what other ideas can we draw from the descriptions of Indian villages on the nature of communities that these are?

1.3. On Some Patterns in the Way Villagers' Life is Structured

Many of the British officials who have described the town have made remarks about the character of the rural populace. Thomas Munro, who served as president of the Madras Presidency, describes the villagers in his account. In other words, the villagers consider their marksmen to be the first line of defense in times of conflict. There is no need for the village communities to fret over the empire's potential collapse or cracks because the village stays intact. Concerning the power struggle, they are unconcerned. Whoever takes the throne will not be able to weaken the village's internal administration. Collectors, magistrates, and prominent farmers are still among the marksmen (Srinivasa, 1960).

In a similar vein, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilkes, while describing the rural community of the Mysore Presidency, claims that every village has a powerful council of twelve individuals known as the Twelve Ayandeas. Every one of these towns is known as a little republic. As its crown, it wears the Patel (Potail). Among these republics, India is one. The villagers seek the Patel's advice in times of crisis, such as war or natural disasters. As a result of the war, the kingdoms are once again divided along geographical lines, but the people do not appear to mind. It is said that the internal management stays the same regardless of who gets the kingdom's power or where the village moves. (Dutt, 2007)

The following is how North Indian officer Sir Charles T. Metcalfe describes village people: village communities are little republics, having everything that the villagers want within themselves. Additionally, they are practically independent in terms of external relations. While the armies of the empires roam the country, the villagers allow themselves to be passed by without interference. The villagers are ready to defend themselves militarily in the event that they cause trouble, plunder, or destroy. When the enemy's power becomes too great to overcome, they retreat to faraway villages to engage in combat. After the enemy has departed, they go back to their jobs. This conflict has the potential to wipe out an entire generation if the looting and killings do not stop. An entire new generation has arrived. The emigrants return to their ancestral homes in the village where they were born; there, the younger generation takes over the roles traditionally played by the older generation,

tending to the elders' fields and farms. Legend has it that they were able to preserve their position through thick and thin, weathering storms of oppression and looting. (Dutta, 2007).

These descriptions, from the viewpoint of the British officers, seems to suggest a pattern on the way the Indian village communities have in terms of arranging and organizing their lives as a village community despite the nature of problems encountered by them.

To summarize, the early British descriptions focus on sketching a picture of Indian villages that tell us things about the way the communities organised their lives and society in terms of governing themselves.¹ Put another way, the entire chain of command from Munro to Metcalfe saw the town as an autonomous political entity.

Besides the descriptions of the British officials, systematic study of Indian villages occurred in less than a hundred years. What do these studies have to say about Indian villages and the lives of the rural people? Let us explore.

2. Classical Village Studies

Village studies became the focus of sociology and cultural anthropology in India after independence. The study of villages was later stepped up by Indian sociologists and Western anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s.² The "Little Community" theory developed by Robert Redfield in 1955 was a supplement to village studies.³ Successive research by M.N. Srinivas (1955), S.C. Dubey (1955), and D.N. Majumdar (1955) sought to elucidate the characteristics of village life. In other words, village studies sought to provide a scientific account of rural life by employing what is known as "Participant Observation" through fieldwork and fieldwork.⁴ What this means is that a number of academics spent time in the village, studying the locals' social, economic, and religious interactions while also keeping a close eye on their way of life. Famous scholars in the area of village studies include M. N. Srinivas, Kathleen Gough, Ishwaran, McKim Marriott, and many more. Village studies itself began by drawing on the traditional social science, anthropological, and sociological canons of knowledge to investigate villages. Researchers in these studies sought answers to questions like, "What are the characteristics of Indian villages?" and "How do villages operate?" as well as to more generalized inquiries about rural life, local customs, and interpersonal dynamics. It is crucial to note that scholars in India primarily examined rural communities through the lens of the caste system when attempting to understand these communities. Consequently, let us take a look at the most important points that various studies on Indian villages have made about the commonalities of the caste system, including the relationship between caste and rank and occupation.

2.1. Caste And Occupation

Social science research on Indian villages has focused on a number of different areas. A crucial one is the relationship between caste and occupation. The Rampur village has been the subject of two studies by M.N. Srinivas (1948 and 1952).⁵ In the first part of his research, M.N. Srinivas describes the basic layout of the village, and in the second part, he details the social structure of the village. It states, among other things, that every caste in the Rampur village has a particular traditional occupation; in fact, some castes have multiple occupations. It is also mentioned that they engage in non-traditional professions that generate income. Peasant Caste, Priestly Caste, Service Caste, and Others Caste are the four categories that make up the castes that are found in the village of Rampur beforehand. The Peasants are a farming caste that traditionally works the land and earns a living as wage laborers and farmers. However, they also dabble in non-farming occupations like running grocery stores, leasing out houses, and renting out transportation. Two examine castes that are thought of as priestly are the Brahmins and the Lingayats. Along with traditional occupations, they also engage in non-traditional occupations, such as farming on temple lands, working in the medical field, being a postmaster, and holding government contracts, among other things. A large number of castes make up the service caste. The Smiths people are divided into two groups, the Kulachari and the Matachari, who both continue to work in the

¹ Also see these texts: Powell, B. B. H. (1892). *The land systems of British India* (Vol. 2). Oxford University Press.; Powell, B. B. H. (1896). *The Indian village community*. Longmans Green.; Powell, B. B. H. (1908). *The origin and growth of village communities in India* (2nd ed.). Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

² Research paper series in Economic and Political Weekly (See Bibliography)

³ Redfield, R., 1955. *The Little Community: Viewpoints for a Study of a Human Whole*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁴ See these texts: Chacko, E. (2004). Positionality and praxis: Fieldwork experiences in rural India. *Singapore journal of tropical geography*, 25(1), 51-63; Delamont, S. (2004). Ethnography and participant observation. *Qualitative research practice*, 217(205-217); Jodhka, S. S. (1998). From "book view" to "field view": Social anthropological constructions of the Indian village. *Oxford development studies*, 26(3), 311-331.; Kaye, J. W. (Ed.). (1855). *Selection of papers of Lord Metcalfe*. Smith Elder & Co.; Kunze, I., & Padmanabhan, M. (2014). Discovering positionalities in the countryside: methodological reflections on doing fieldwork in South India. *Erdkunde*, 277-288.; Srinivas, M. N. (1975). Village studies, participant observation and social science research in India. *Economic and political weekly*, 1387-1394.

⁵ The Social System of Mysore Village (1955) is the supplemental material he discusses in his article's footnote.

same traditional ways. Agricultural practices are followed by Potters who create ceramics and pottery. Barbers traditional barbering entails shaving. One of the traditional jobs of the Washerman people is washing clothes. The members of these five castes make up Rampur's Service Caste; they help farmers out during harvest time in exchange for a set amount of rice. The farmers who grow sugarcane also sell the oil that is extracted from the plant. Plus, they have jobs as farmhands, small-scale merchants, and general laborers. Liquor production has long been an integral part of the Toddyman way of life. Furthermore, you can find them working in the fields, at clothing stores, or even in the sewing industry. The Basketmaker have a longstanding practice of making and selling baskets out of bamboo. Korama men are involved in pig farming and spreading pig manure across farmers' fields, and Swineherd women are involved in fortune telling as they go around the village. In addition to doing laundry, the Trader families engage in traditional trade. Servant labor is the occupation of the untouchables because of their divine calling to serve (Srinivas, 1952).

Kathleen Gough, another sociologist, conducted research in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in 1952 on the hamlet of Kumbhpettai. A detailed description of Tanjore's architecture is provided in her study. Tanjore is home to many different social groups, and she distinguishes between Brahmins, non-Brahmins, and Adi Dravidians. She divides them into three categories. Several castes are in the other two categories, apart from the Brahmins. Certain Maratha castes, the Tamil Vellalars, and the Tamil Kallans are among the most senior non-Brahmin castes. In Tanjore, they have long been responsible for overseeing the village and its land. The non-Brahmin community is divided into lower castes, which include groups like the Konans, Muppannas, Pataiyatchi, and Ahambatiyans. Among the non-Brahmin community, they are commonly considered agricultural servants and cowherds. Gough claims that they have historically held this position. Adi Dravidians, also known as Moola Dravidians, make up the third category. According to Gough, these people belong to the "outer castes" or lower castes. Three major castes make up this category: the Pallanas, the Parayanas, and the Chikkalians. Most members of the Pallana and Parayana castes now work as agricultural servants; they were previously serfs of the landlord caste. In other words, he describes the various occupations held by the different castes in the Tanjore village (Gough, 1952).

Researching the village of Shivapur in the Dharwad district of Karnataka, K. Ishwaran delves further into the correlation between caste and occupation, offering an explanation that is confined to the caste system. "Since the caste system is the foundation of Shivapur's social structure, it is possible to study this structure while considering Shivapur." "A caste is an institution, and its membership is determined by birth, intermarriage, occupation, distance, and drinking," he comments. "Typically, one's occupation is frequently associated with their caste," he continues. In addition to being born into a caste, everyone is also destined to work within that caste. It is commonly believed that adhering to one's caste's occupation is equivalent to reverting to the traditional practice of picking one's own job. We can see that Ishwaran shares Srinivas's belief that caste and wealth are related (Ishwaran, 2007).

2.2. Indian Villages And the Description of Hierarchy

Numerous factors have piqued the curiosity of social science researchers in studying Indian village communities. We have previously seen that numerous scholars have asserted a correlation between occupational status and caste. Similarly, they also talk about caste and hierarchy. So, let us take a look at how scholars classify castes and what factors influence their hierarchy.

First, M. N. Srinivas's article, *The Social System of a Mysore Village*, covers a lot of ground and is set in the village of Ramapur. He describes the caste system in Ramapur village while outlining the village's social structure. Consequently, there are a lot of moving parts in the caste system, and this becomes clear when we examine Srinivas's explanation of the hierarchy. And it is clear from Srinivas's explanation what factors determine the hierarchy. The social hierarchy in Ramapur village is attempted to be explained by Srinivas, who investigated the hamlet's social system. Srinivas contends that the village of Ramapur is home to multiple castes, each of which is unequal, separated from one another by endogamy and commensality, and further stratified by dietary preferences and occupational specialization. In addition to dividing the nineteen castes of Ramapur into four categories and explaining their position in the stratification, he contends that castes cannot be perceived locally according to varna. They associate this level of variation with dietary patterns and occupations. It is true that people only eat food made by others in their own caste, and that food is a symbol of caste hierarchy, according to Srinivas (Srinivas, 1952, p. 20).

Kathleen Gough is just one of many scholars who have focused on Tanjore. Her research on the social structure of a Tanjore district village, Kumbhpettai, is published in the article *The Social Structure of a Tanjore Village*. She classifies the inhabitants of Tanjore into three distinct groups: the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins, and the Adi Dravidians. In the town of Tanjore, Gough initially notices the Brahmins. She asserts that the Brahmins are entitled to administer the village of Tanjore and own land there. Second, there is the non-Brahmin community, which is further subdivided into two categories: the upper caste and the lower caste. It is the lower group that is known as the Adi Dravidians. Put another way, the villagers of Tanjore seem to have strict social order, according to Kathleen Gough's account (Gough, 1952).

Similarly, K. Ishwaran elucidates the caste system in his research on the Shivapur village. According to Ishwaran, it is helpful to remember the overarching pattern of the five castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and Untouchables. He also says that the caste system is at the heart of all social practices in Shivapur.

The exact traits of a pure caste system don't apply to everything, but their principles do. Thus, Ishwaran classifies each caste in the Shivapur village according to the Varna pattern (Ishwaran, 2007).

The research of M. N. Srinivas, K. Ishwaran, and Kathleen Gough all prominently feature caste hierarchy. The study of these villages also reveals another important aspect: the caste hierarchy. Some common factors are reflected in these narratives, which indicate that caste hierarchy exists. In his article about Ramapura village, for instance, Srinivas claims that the castes are divided by endogamy and commensality, and that the food they eat and the occupations they do contribute to the caste system. Similarly, Kathleen Gough's analysis of the Kumbhpettai village maintains food and occupation as the primary criteria for determining caste status. Ishwaran, who researched the Shivapura village, is observed using the varna model to establish the caste hierarchy. Not only does the caste system play a significant role in village studies, but food and employment also contribute to hierarchy.

Conclusion

A few things jump out at us when we read the descriptions of villages that have been common for the past 200 years. First, a local system was in place in the village, according to British administrative surveys. We also go a bit further with the social science accounts that emerged in the mid-20th century. Caste holds a central place in the survey of village studies and is linked to a wide range of other factors, including occupation and hierarchy. If we look at both these factors by the way they are described, very clearly that raises a few questions when thought through critically.

Firstly, with regard to the idea that there was a local governing system in the Indian villages raises an interesting issue: in times when there were no democratic institutions, what was the nature of the governing systems which the British officials saw in Indian villages? What made these governing systems into a 'system'? And so on. It is also unclear how these systems, if at all there was one, sustained themselves.

Secondly, the descriptions of village studies point out that somehow caste is the only foundation on which every other aspect of the villages is controlled. It is unclear how caste played such a role in the first place. What is the nature of the relationship between caste and the occupation done by the people of villages needs further study. This is because it is mostly the case that families who carry out certain professions can be from multiple castes and therefore to say that cast and occupation are related per say is difficult to conclude. Further, caste and hierarchy is also a question to be critically thought out. If caste plays a central role in deciding hierarchy then what is hierarchy determined by other factors such as economic condition, traditions and so on? These questions beg for further inquiry.

More generally, recent studies in social sciences suggest that social scientific descriptions of Indian culture and society are European experiences of India and have nothing to do with the way Indian society actually is. Considering this claim, there is also the need to re-evaluate the social scientific descriptions of Indian villages to see how much of what we know about our villages are simply reproductions of western cultural experience, before we reconstruct appropriate descriptions of Indian villages.

With these considerations we can safely assume that the status of literature in village studies requires thorough re-examination so that a possibility to build a path towards scientific research on Indian villages becomes a possibility.

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