

Rural And Agrarian Social Structure

The Idea Of Indian Village And Village Studies

Introduction:

Village occupies an important place in the social and cultural landscape of contemporary India. Notwithstanding India's significant industrialisation over the last five or six decades, and a considerable increase in the urban population, a large majority of Indians continue to live in its more than five lakh villages and remain dependent on agriculture, directly or indirectly. According to 2001 census, rural India accounted for nearly 72% of India's total population. Similarly, though the share of agriculture has come down to around one fourth of the total national income, nearly half of India's working population is directly employed in the agricultural sector.

Apart from it being an important demographic and structural reality, characterising contemporary Indian, village has also been an important ideological category; a category through which India has often been imagined in modern times. The village has been seen as an ultimate signifier of the authentic native value, a place where one could see or observe the real India and develop an understanding of the way local people organise their social relationships and belief systems.

In Ramayana three words are used for village i.e. Gram, Nagar, Puri. When one talks about village it is assumed that it is a place where Commoners live. In Kautilya's Arthshastra it has been mentioned that it is the duty of the King to ensure how new villages is to be created, how much tax people should pay and the extent of their linkage with the social world. Therefore multiple number of villages have emerged throughout the history of India.

When the Mughals came to India they made villages as the smallest administrative unit, Mazumdars, Zamindari's were introduced in India. When British came to India there existed autonomous and semi-autonomous villages controlling huge quarter of fertile and wasteland. Different commissions were instituted from 1772 onwards to make the best use of village lands like Zamindari system, Ryotwari, Mahalwari Syatem and taxes were collected through these units. British treated village as economic unit whereas village in India has several other characteristics, a cultural unit (traditionally), political unit (in modern and contemporary India).

Most of the British scholars were looking at Indian villages from colonial view thinking that village communities are not subject to change, pessimistic therefore village communities are "Little

Republics", self-perpetuating in character, stereotype and self governed. They mentioned that the ruler of India can keep on changing but these villages operated as independent unit without much concern for the change of rule. Hence, to bring a big change in villages in India is not imaginable.

Gandhiji said that 'India lives in villages'. He mentioned that one cannot imagine freedom movement in India without the participation of village community and so he instituted Gram Sena. He believed that if India lives in villages, developmental programmes should start from there only.

Marx and Gandhiji were coming together when they both reflect on village as Marx also considered India as pre-developed economy because of primitive techniques employed, cooperative landholdings etc. Village study emerged as a critique to Indology. As Indologists studied India from text view and considered textual information and historical texts, they presented only a restricted picture by believing that whatever has been written in these texts must be true and that it must have happened.

Village is a basic unit of social structure, through village we try to understand sociology of India. When historian looks at village from economic point of view political scientist looks at it from the criteria of functions of village headman, caste panchayats etc. Village is not just a structure, within a village, it consists of multiple structures e.g. caste social structure, class social structure, power social structure as observed by Andre Beteille. Different aspects of village social life has been an important subject matter for sociologist to study village, its continuity and compared these village structures to find out similarities and differences among them. These village studies greatly reflect the diversity present in India.

When British came to India they never considered land as political entity like Mughals. The British came to India for economic purpose, they studied Indian village communities in depth so as to have a better understanding of India in order to economically exploit it and to formulate policies to safeguard British interest in India. Colonial rule evolved on scientific lines. Early colonial scholars finds out that village communities were geographically isolated from other adjoining village and that they are self-sufficient unit, with no access to market and they have only tax liability to state hence 'little republics' concept of Indian village emerged. They said that unity and self-sufficiency are the hallmark of Indian villages.

British could easily rule over India because people living in the grassroot were hardly bothered who was ruling. They were concerned only about their land and indigenous right. British rule hardly made any changes in village because firstly they annexed different states and asked the rulers to sign treaties and did not interfered directly with the people. British transformed these kings into Zamindars and imposed a fix quantum of tax. Indigenous rulers hardly did anything to improve the quality

and development of land and huge amount of revenue was paid to British so there was no consideration for the Village people even in times of drought.

MN Srinivas took a lead role in studying village in India. He stated that within village multiple forms of life exist which cannot be studied from time bound mechanism, therefore to reach any valid conclusion field study method is a must because through field study only one can study the dynamic nature of Indian villages.

Village Studies In India

The rise of Indian sociology cannot be truly studied through Indological method. Its growth and maturity cannot be understood without explaining the influence of village studies. Village study is not an ideology and neither its a methodology rather it is an intellectual attempt to study Indian society when it is evident to look into the vastness of its population, diversity of its culture, variability in people's response to change.

It is too difficult to develop scientific understanding of India. Colonial rulers, administrators were holding romantic opinion about village India indicating that village is the heart of India which is quite static, self governed, self-sufficient, politically autonomous and culturally unique and linkage between which village and larger society is purposive and specific. This imagination evolved the thesis of self-sufficient character of village communities in India. These theories were rejected by MN Srinivas and AM Shah in their famous article "Myth Of Self-Sufficiency" of village communities in India. Collecting empirical data from different villages they indicated that:

- village communities are not self-sufficient because people belonging to one village were practising exogamy. Thus marrying women belonging to other villages.
- The incidence of foreign trade is well-documented in Indian history indicating that exposure of village to outside world. They further indicated that in traditional Indian village there was presence of specialised market (cattle market, vegetable market, textile market) and people belonging to different villages were visiting these market extending the network of economic relationships from one village to the larger society.
- Villages had a strong political network with the outside world but British scholars failed to understand caste councils, local council is which involve people belonging to different villages took part in decision-making process. Hence conceptualising village as self-governing unit is a Colonial bias towards India.

Starting from Marx to colonial scholars all hold the romantic view i.e. land bind the people of India together. Empirical study indicates that there are many villages where land belonging to families and village land located outside the territorial jurisdiction of the village. As a result man living in one village was visiting another village to put his land under plough explaining the extension of network of relationship from one village to another on regular basis.

They concluded by saying that British notice the presence of no permanent market in village India. They further noticed that India's villages are not well connected through urban centres and most of the disputes are resolved within the village than litigants coming through the purview of legal code. Thus the colonial scholars jumped into conclusion that village communities are self-sufficient and self-governing unit that they are potentially not.

Milton Singer and Mc Kim Marriott also offered a strong rejection of the idea village self-sufficiency. In their study they found out that some villages doesn't have graveyard within them, one fourth of the credits come from outside, barbers, Brahmins from adjoining villages regularly come to offer their service to the people of village therefore economic and social dependency of the village with other adjoining villages were highly pronounced and so village self-sufficiency is an intellectual imagination and not a matter of fact.

Marriott introduced the concepts like universalisation and parochialisation to explain the cultural communication between village and larger society for example during green revolution peasant political party emerged into the national level and its impact is not restricted to village level only.

SC Dubay conducted research on the impact of community development programme on village. He indicated that in India local cultures move up to the larger society in order to become a part of the greater tradition and that is known as 'Process Of Universalisation' for example the local festival known as 'Suniya' initially started from a village but subsequently it went on to become the national festival of Raksha Bandhan. Likewise all sectarian movements are initiated from the village but subsequently received patronage and become part of great tradition. Hence dance, music, language, literature and religion in India always move in a circular direction and so acceptance of the concept of self-sufficiency will be an intellectual mistake.

Andre Beteille in his study of India's village - past and present indicate:

- colonialists failed to understand that village houses people and human beings by nature appreciate change, rather than always going for a status quo. People in village India were responding to changes through cross

cultural communication but these responses were slow and the impatient British scholars concluded that village in India constitute closed communities.

- He asked a fundamental question indicating that many rulers came to India and introduce public policy arbitrarily, the people of village India accepted these policies for centuries together because of which colonialism sustained in India. Had the people of India being allergic to change they would have thrown out the British from their soil in few years than waiting for centuries. People of India go for slow change, not because they are myopic but because of the fact that they apply their common sense and go for only those changes that can be internalised by them for their well-being.

Thus in conclusion it can be said that British glorified village solidarity, autonomy, self-sufficiency to pass on the liabilities to people of India to prove India as a white man's burden. Despite the best attempt of colonial ruler if India refuses to change then it's because of its absolute commitment to principles of inclusiveness (economic, cultural, social). Empirical studies on village communities in India rejecting to the idea explain how village self-sufficiency is a myth and village has always been integrated with the larger society in different degrees.

MN Srinivas in his study of Rampura village finds out that the rise of secular domination of caste as against the ritual domination of Brahmin. He finds out that Brahmins - Vokalingams relationship is not complimentary, driven by ritualistic prescription of Jajmani relationship rather it is transactional driven by interest. Andre Beteille in a study of Siripuram village finds out interrelationship among the people of village are not just driven by caste but also driven by class and power.

Andre Beteille finds out interrelationship among the people mostly confined to their own caste is slowly changing. As a result both caste and class are becoming indicators to frequency of interrelationship among people. He considers marriage is driven by caste consideration but everyday relationship is evolving as caste neutral.

MS Rao in a study of Yadavpur, finds out how economic affluence has given a self confidence to Yadav's who now are active in politics and evolving into dominant caste as against traditional dominant Jats. Likewise the dynamic nature of caste, inter-caste conflict, intra-caste conflict are analysed in the writings of several scholars who point out at the constant adjustment that Indian villages are going to in space and time.

All the above mentioned studies indicated traditional class hierarchy is crumbling. Caste and class identity are influencing to interpersonal relationship among people in village India.

Agrarian Social Structure - Evolution Of Land Tenure System , Land Reforms

Scarlett Epstein looks into the impact of irrigation project, green revolution in case of two villages of South Karnataka where she finds out that agricultural modernity has established a strong linkage between caste and landholding. Wraditional dominant caste has now evolved into the upper caste.

Kathleen Gaugh in a study of Kumbapetta village finds out that in rural village big bourgeois, rich farmers, petty bourgeois, semi-proletariats, pure-proletariats have evolved. She finds out that agrarian modernity has consolidated class division into rural India.

Daniel Thorner finds out a strong linkage between caste and class in agrarian India. He finds out a correspondence between Malik (upper caste), Kisan (middle class), Mazdoor (lower caste). He considers green revolution, land reforms did not benefit rural poor therefore there is capitalist agricultural development taking place in socialist India.

Farmers in India went through multiple exploitation ,they lost their control over land, their ignorance and lack of knowledge catalysed the process of exploitation. Poverty in India is a result of colonial rule. This poverty is the foundation of Indian national movement and not the nationalism.

Colonial land tenure system can be divided into two types:

1) Zamindari system, Mahalwari

2) Ryotwari system.

Ryotwari system was applicable to South India and West India. The essence of the system was that land owner was tilling the land on the basis of hereditary. Under this system British respected the hereditary ownership of the land. But officially it was under British control. Land was sold/auctioned to other people in order to ensure rent.

There were frequent famines and drought. Hence the holders of the land borrowed money from the moneylenders in order to ensure payment of taxes. This prosses went on for 3 to 4 years after which the accumulation of huge interest forced many Ryots to become landless for their lack of capacity to pay taxes. When these lands were auctioned it was purchased by the moneylenders who appoints the landless ryots to work for them. Hence this converted the poor farmers from owners of land to tillers of land over which they had no right.

Zamindari system was initially introduced in Bengal. Zamindari system became a kind of investment for rich and affluent people. Due to better control over fieldworkers and tenants, sub Zamindars emerged under zamindars which further led to the emergence of sub sub zamindars, sub sub sub zamindars. The Zamindar at the lower most position took into consideration the interests and needs of all the zamindars above him and on the basis of that imposed tax at the grassroot level. People who worked on the fields lacked other alternate skills who cannot go for alternative occupation which forced them to work under disadvantaged condition. Different kinds of permutation and combination were taking place under Zamindari system.

Land improvement system was never introduced in India and this led to twin form exploitation which was experienced by petty farmers i.e. one by the state and the other by the zamindars. To terrorise the poor farmers an efficient police system was created. This led to the real owners of land being subjected to marginalisation leading to polarisation of Indian rural society into "haves" and "have nots".

British further wanted to expand their economic interest in India which could only be possible if they go for cash crop production for commercialisation and trade. From 1897 - 1947 population increased by 38% whereas agricultural production increased by only 16% because agricultural land was put to produce commercial cash crops which increased by 58% and subsistence production decreased by 18%.

British flooded the Indian market with various kinds of durable items which further lead to the destruction of crafts industry. Artisans were left unemployed as cheap British products were available in the Indian market. This led them to rely on land and in this way provided additional cheap labour to the British who exploited these artisans to the hilt to further increase the production of cash crops.

When these atrocities became absolute in nature people started revolting in different parts of the country e.g. Moplah Rebellion, Kheda Satyagrah, Champaran movement, etc. By 1930 Kisan Sabha movement started getting momentum which organised poor peasants to fight the private army of zamindars. The farmers also supported the Indian National Congress which raise their cause and petitioned the British government.

The impact of land tenure system was studied by sociologist from three perspective:

- Gandhian perspective,*
- Nationalist perspective,*
- Marxist perspective.*

Gandhian sociologist's pointed out that land tenure system was attempted to develop a relationship between landlords and peasants. They say all landlords are not anti-people and that they should join hands with each other and give their extra land to landless peasant through state redistribution

system. They advocated that zamindars should voluntarily come up and give up their extra land to the landless labourers.

Nationalist sociologists focus upon how state has the primary responsibility to introduce land tenure system and gratify the needs of larger people. State should take up the responsibility of improving agriculture through various measures i.e. providing cheap loans, machinery, educating farmers etc.

Marxist scholars stand opposite to nationalist and Gandhian scholars. They say that land tenure system was successful only in two states i.e. Kerala and West Bengal and that cooperative movements were also successful only in these two areas and partially successful in some western states. According to Marxists, a State should not be given the responsibility of reforming the land. State is the root of all possible evils and people should go for self mobilisation. They should carry arms and go for naxalite movement so as to eradicate absentee landlord system from India.

Implication Of Land Reform Systems

It has been found out through various surveys that there has not been much change in landholding size of upper-class even after 20 years of implementation of land reform system. There is strong connectivity between land and caste. Traditional dominant caste control over land has not been dilutive under the influence of land reform systems. Looking at the failure of the land reform system it can be considered that capitalist agriculture development is happening in socialist India.

Nuisance of "Benami Transfers" supported by State Administration has been depriving the masses from actual ownership rights over the land. The rural landless poor is evolving into underclass and since they are voiceless they cannot stand opposite to the hegemonic domination of local landlords, police, administration and legal courts. The class - caste Nexus is the primary source of inequality in rural India which cannot be broken by policies introduced by state from time to time.

Bhalla and Chaddah in their study of the "Impact Of Green Revolution" in 20 villages of Punjab indicate that neither land reform system nor green revolution ever improved the condition of landless and poor farmers. They found out that benefits of green revolution is largely pocketed by rich farmers who have control over seed cooperatives, credit cooperatives and irrigation cooperatives.

Agricultural development programmes are making class inequality in India highly prominent and intensive. The sustainability of inequalities spelt out by RBI report of 1997 had indicated 10% of our population is having control over 58% of total resources and the last 10% of rural population have control over 0.1% of the total resources.

These inequalities are becoming foundation to public protest in different forms, manifested in terms of Maoist insurgency and naxalite movement. Therefore rural development programme should be reoriented to cater to the needs of the people taking into consideration the questions like sustainability, inclusiveness, participative and people centric policies to minimise the class inequality in rural India.

Social Consequences Of Land Reform System

In Bihar Bhomians have emerged as the dominant class and subsequently extracted maximum benefits from land reform system. In Haryana and Punjab land reform system led to implementation of green revolution which subsequently gave rise to highly dominant caste i.e. Jats.

Because of land reform system and subsequently through the implementation of green revolution upper caste have become dominant and have flourished which has polarised the quantum of inequality even further leading to resentment among various sections who have been left out in the process of development in every sphere of life.