Patriarchy as a 'Natural Order'
Constructions of Caste and Gender in the
Indian 'Village Studies'

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The studies of Indian villages carried out by sociologists and social anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s were an important land-mark in the history of Indian social sciences. It was perhaps for the first time that the empirical methods of modern social sciences were extensively and systematically applied to the study of Indian society. The village studies offered a fieldwork based understanding of social organisation of the village society, or what M.N. Srinivas called, a 'field-view' of India, an approach that was to replace, or at least to contest, the then dominant 'book-view' of India developed from classical Hindu scriptures by the Indologists (Jodhka, 1998).

The social anthropological 'village studies' had an added signifi-cance for they were carried out at a time when post-Independence India was trying to develop the self-identity of the nation. Through its method of fieldwork and a discourse of empirical scientism, the village studies played an important role in reinforcing the national imagination. Using, more or less, a similar kind of theoretical framework and methods of data collection, social anthropologists studied villages in different parts of the subcontinent and produced a picture that had many similarities in the way social life was organised in a 'typical Indian village'. This, in a sense, was an 'evidence' of the underlying unity of India.

Historically also, village has been an important micro-unit through which India has been properly peeped into. Though it was during the British colonial rule that India was first categorised as a land of 'village republics', in the post-Independence period also the village continued to be treated as the basic unit of Indian society. Village has often been seen as an atomic signifier of the 'authentic native life', a place where one could see or observe the 'real' social realities of India and develop

an understanding of the way local people organised their social relationships and belief systems. As Beteille pointed out, 'the village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation'(Beteille 1980:108).

While a considerable amount of work has been done by historians and other social scientists on the way colonial ethnographers construct-ed Indian village life and the various implications that these colonial representations had for the Indian society,[1] social anthropological constructions of the Indian village have not so far been examined critically or in much detail. The existing commentaries tend to focus more on the methodological significance or appropriateness of treating the village as a unit of study for social scientific understanding of the Indian society[2] rather than examining the contents and constructs of the social organisation of rural India as represented in these studies. Even when comments are made on the contents of these studies, it is generally on the preoccupation of these anthropologists with the study of caste. It is certainly true that most of the village studies treated caste as the primary institution of social organisation of the Indian village. Their 'holistic' approach also made them document virtually all the aspects of the village life. For example, even though the social scientists had not yet 'discovered' the category of gender, one can find extensive references to the nature of man-woman relationships in these studies.

After locating the context of the Indian village studies, I shall try to examine below the ways in which sociologists and social anthropol-ogists of this genre constructed social organisation of the village life. My specific focus will be on the manner in which different aspects of the man-woman relationships were presented and how the status of women was shown to be linked to the working of the caste system in rural India.

LOCATING 'VILLAGE STUDIES'

The village studies undertaken by social anthropologists during 1950s and 1960s in India were an offshoot of the newly emerged interest in the study of peasantry in the Western academy. Emergence of the 'new states' following de-colonisation during the post-war period had an important influence on research priorities in the social sciences. The most significant feature of the newly emerged 'Third World'

countries was the dependence of large proportions of their populations on a stagnant agrarian sector. The struggle for freedom from colonial rule had also developed new aspirations among the 'masses' and the 'elites' of these societies. In some of these struggles, the peasantry had played a crucial role. Thus the primary agenda for the new political regimes was the transformation of their 'backward' and stagnant economies. Though the strategies and priorities differed, 'modernisation' and 'development' became common programmes in most of the 'Third World' countries. It was in this historical context that 'development studies' emerged as one of the most important areas of academic interest in the global academy. Development studies were supposed to provide relevant data and prescriptive knowledges for socio-economic transformations.

Since a large majority of the populations in the Third World countries were directly dependent on agriculture, understanding the prevailing structures of agrarian relations and working out ways and means of transforming them were recognised as being the most important priorities within development studies. Western political interest in the rural inhabitants of the Third World and the growing influence of modernisation and development theories also brought with them a great deal of funding for the study of peasant economies and societies (Silverman, 1987: 11). It was in this context that the concept of 'peasantry' found currency in the discipline of social anthropology. At a time when primitive tribes were either in the process of disappearing or had already disappeared, the 'discovery' of peasantry provided a new lease of life to the discipline of social anthropology (Beteille, 1974b). Krober defined peasants as 'part societies with part cultures' (Krober in Redfield, 1965: 20). The peasantry was seen as a universal 'human type' having 'something generic about it . . . a kind of arrangement of humanity with some similarities all over the world'. Peasants were believed to be attached to the land through the bonds of sentiments and emotions. Agriculture, for them, was 'a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit' (Redfield, 1965: 17-18; Shanin, 1987).

This notion of peasant society fitted well with the new evolutionist mode of thinking being made popular by 'modernisation theory' around the same time. Peasantry, in this framework, invariably referred to what Europe had been before the industrial revolution and what the 'Third World' still was. Thus the notion of traditional society conceptualised by the modernisation theory as the opposite of 'modern

society', resembled very closely the notion of 'peasantry' in the new discipline of the 'peasant studies'.

The 'village community' was identified as the social foundation of the peasant economy in Asia (Breman, 1987: 1). Beteille argues that this conceptual identity of village with peasant community 'is rooted in European ideology and European scholarship' (Beteille, 1974b: 47). It is quite easy to see this connection between the Redfieldian notion of 'peasant studies' and the Indian 'village studies'. The single most popular concept used by the anthropologists studying the Indian village was the Redfieldian notion of the 'little community'. Among the first works on the subject, *Village India: Studies in the Little Community* (ed. M. Marriot, 1955), was brought out under the direct supervision of Robert Redfield. He even wrote a preface to this book.

Having found a relevant subject-matter in the village, anthropologists (many of whom were either from the West or were Indian scholars trained in the Western universities) initiated field studies in the early 1950s. A number of short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages were published by these anthropologists in the newly launched Indian journal called *The Economic Weekly* (which later came to be known as *Economic and Political Weekly*) during October 1951 and May 1954. These essays were put together by M.N. Srinivas in the form of a book with the title *India's Villages* in 1955. In the same year M. Marriot published another collection by the name of *Village India*. Interestingly, the first volume of *Rural Profiles* by D.N. Majumdar also appeared in 1955. All the three were edited volumes and many of the contributors were common. Srinivas, for example, had a paper in each of the three volumes. The first full-length study of a village near Hyderabad in the Telangana region, *Indian Village* by S.C. Dube also appeared in the same year.

There was a virtual explosion of village studies in the sixties and seventies. 'Although social anthropologists were the first in the field which they dominated throughout, scholars from other disciplines— political science, history, economics, and so on—were also attracted to it' (Beteille, 1996: 235). Though most of the studies provided a more general account of social, economic and cultural life of the rural people, some of the later studies also focused on specific aspects of the rural social structure, such as, stratification, kinship, or religion.

An anthropologist typically selected a single 'middle' sized village where he/she carried out an intensive fieldwork, generally by staying with the 'community' for a fairly long period of time, ranging from

one to two years, and at the end of the stay he/she was supposed to come out with a 'holistic' account of the social and cultural life of the village inhabitants. The most important feature that qualified these studies to be called anthropological was the fieldwork component and the use of 'participant-observation', a method of data collection that anthropologists in the West had developed while studying tribal communities. The method of intensive fieldwork came to be seen as the defining characteristic of the discipline of social anthropology and there was a fairly standardised pattern that had to be followed by the practitioners. 'A typical piece of intensive fieldwork was one in which the worker lived for a year or more among a community of perhaps four or five hundred people and studied every detail of their life and culture; in which he came to know every member of the community personally; in which he was not content with generalised information, but studied every feature of life and custom in concrete detail and by means of the vernacular language' (River in Beteille and Madan, 1975: 2). The rules and regularities of the native customs were not merely to be recorded by the ethnographer with camera, note book and pencil but more fruitfully observed by himself being a participant in the happenings around him. 'Intensive fieldwork experience was of critical importance in the career of an anthropologist. It formed the basis of his comprehension of all other societies, including societies differing greatly from the one of which he had first-hand knowledge. No amount of book-knowledge was a substitute for field experience' (Srinivas, 1955: 88). The 'participant-observation' method was seen as a method that 'understood social life from within, in terms of the values and meanings attributed to it by the people themselves' (Beteille, 1996: 10).

Majumdar too contended that after the isolated tribal communities, the village came to be seen as the right kind of subject-matter for anthropologists. The genuine field of study for the anthropologists, he argued, was the *Gemeinschaft*, the 'closed community' and it was 'in the context of "evaporation" of tribal societies due to assimilation and/or extinction, that they were compelled to turn their attention to the rural community which continues to retain the essential face-to-face *Gemeinschaft* character'. Thus, Majumdar argued that the anthropologist's love for rural studies was a natural extension of his/her interest in tribal studies. A typical anthropologist lived with the people he studied, established rapport with them, participated in their day-to-day life, spoke their language, and recorded his

observations of the ways of life of the people (Majumdar, 1956:138). Participant observation also provided continuity between the earlier tradition of anthropology when it studied the tribal communities and its later preoccupation with the village.

Village, for the anthropologist, was not just an area of specialised interest. Specialising on India meant studying 'village' or 'caste'. The village and its hamlets represented 'India in microcosm' (Hoebel in Hiebert, 1971: vii). The two were seen as the defining features of the Indian society. The people of India lived in villages and their social organisation could be understood by referring to the structure and ideology of caste hierarchy.

Carrying out village studies during the fifties and the sixties was critical because that was the time when the Indian society was believed to be experiencing fundamental changes and the anthropologist needed to record details of a 'traditional social order' before it was too late. Srinivas underscored this urgency when he wrote 'We have, at the most, another ten years in which to record facts about a type of society which is changing fundamentally and with great rapidity' (Srinivas, 1955b: 99).

SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE VILLAGE: CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER

The intellectual and historical contexts in which social anthropologists began their works on the village largely guided the kinds of research questions they identified for their studies. The tradition of studying tribal communities that emphasised a 'holistic' perspective also had its influence on the way village was visualised. Though anthropological methods of participant observation and their frameworks had evolved out of their experiences with the relatively egalitarian tribal communities, the empiricist approach that emphasised documenting almost everything relevant that they could observe during their field-studies also meant giving due place to prevailing realities in the field. Thus, despite their preoccupation with kinship, religion and ritual life of the 'little communities', documenting their internal structures and village social life could not be completed without looking at the prevailing social differences. Theoretically also the emphasis on 'unity' did not mean absence of differences and social inequality. Neither did it mean that these questions were not important for social anthropology. Though not all of them began their work with a direct focus on understanding the structures of inequalities, almost all scholars

offered detailed descriptions of the prevailing differences of caste, class and gender in the village social life. Being rich in empirical description, one can construct a picture of the social relations that may not necessarily fit in the framework with which these studies were actually carried out.

The Caste System

Caste and hierarchy have long been seen as the distinctive and defining features of the Indian society. It was during the colonial period that caste was, for the first time, theorised in the modern sociological language. The colonial administrators also gathered extensive ethnographic details and wrote detailed accounts of the way systems of caste distinctions and hierarchies worked in different parts of the subcontinent. Social anthropology in the post-Independence India continued with a similar approach that saw caste as the most important and distinctive feature of Indian society. While caste was a concrete structure that guided social relationships in the Indian village, hierarchy was its ideology. Hierarchy was made to appear as the single most important idea in the Indian culture that pervaded almost every aspect of village life.[3]

An individual in the caste society lived in a hierarchical world. It was not only the people who were divided into higher or lower groups, but also the food they ate, the dresses and ornaments they wore, the customs and manners they practised were all ranked in an order of hierarchy. In the formal sense, the traditional *varna* system divided the Hindu society into five major categories. The first three, viz., Brahmins (the priests or men of learning), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) and Vaishyas (traders) were regarded as *dvijas* or the twice born. The fourth category was that of Shudras, composed of numerous occupational castes who were regarded as relatively 'clean' and were not classed as 'untouchables'. In the fifth major category were placed all the 'untouchable' castes. This classification, Dube argued, was accepted by Hindus all over India. The legitimate occupations to be followed by people in these major categories (*varnas*) were defined by tradition. Within each category there were several sub-groups (*jāti* or castes), which could be arranged in a hierarchical order within themselves. In this general framework of the *varna* system, with considerable variations in different regions there were several socially autonomous castes, each fitting into one of the five major divisions

but otherwise practically independent in their socio-religious sphere of life (Dube, 1955: 35-36). Though the essence of caste lay in 'the arrangement of hereditary groups in a hierarchy', the popular impression derived from the idea of *varṇa* that arranged groups in an order with Brahmins at the top and Harijans at the bottom was right only partly. The empirical studies pointed out that 'in fact only the two opposite ends of the hierarchy were relatively fixed; in between, and especially in the middle region, there was considerable room for debate regarding mutual position' (Srinivas, 1980: 5).

Caste divisions were seen to 'determine and decide all social relations'. Though most scholars saw caste to be a closed system where 'entry into a social status was a function of heredity and individual achievement, personal quality or wealth had, according to the strict traditional prescription, no say in determining the social status' (Majumdar, 1958: 19). There were some who argued that the way caste operated at the local level was 'radically different from that expressed in the *varṇa* scheme. Mutual rank was uncertain and arguable and this stemmed from the fact that mobility was possible in caste' (Srinivas, 1976: 175). Similarly, stressing the significant role that secular factors played in determining status ranking at the local level, Srinivas argued:

The articulated criteria of ranking were usually ritual, religious or moral resulting in concealing the importance of secular criteria. The influence of the latter was, however, real. For instance, while land ownership and numerical strength were crucial in improving caste rank, any claim to high rank had to be expressed in ritual and symbolic terms. But at any given moment there were inconsistencies between secular position and ritual rank (Srinivas, 1976: 176).

Dube identified six factors that contributed towards the status differentiation in the village community of Shamirpet: religion and caste; landownership; wealth; position in government service and village organisation; age; and distinctive personality traits (Dube, 1955: 161). Attempts to claim a higher ritual status through, what Srinivas called sanskritisation, was not a simple process. It could not be achieved only through a ritual and life-style imitation and had to be also negotiated with the local power structure.

Ambitious castes, or local sections of them, tried to borrow the customs, ritual and life-style of the higher castes in an effort to move up. That was the way to be one up on one's structural neighbours. The locally dominant caste was an obstacle to mobility for several reasons. In the first place, such mobility had the potential

of threatening its own ambition, if not position. Second, it could result in a chain reaction which could then lead to the suspension of the flow of services and goods from dependent castes (ibid., 175-76).

Similarly, stressing secular factors, Dube pointed to the manner in which the caste panchayat of the lower or the menial castes worked as unions to secure their employment and strengthen their bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the land owning dominant castes. As he illustrates from his study:

It is not easy for an agriculturist to remove a family attached to his household and secure services of another.... His difficulty will not be in dismissing him but in finding a substitute. Each of these castes have a developed inter-village council. Occupational castes have developed trade unionism. . . . No one else would be willing to act as a substitute for fear of being penalised by the caste panchayat. It may be even difficult for a number of families to join together and import a family belonging to that occupational caste from a different village . . . (Dube, 1955: 60).

However, normally the caste system was viewed as functioning in the context of the village community. The *jajmānī* system was seen to be binding together different castes living in a village or a group of neighbouring villages in enduring and pervasive relationships.

Gender Differences

It is rather interesting to note that although 'gender' as a conceptual category had not yet been introduced in the social sciences when the social anthropologists were doing their field studies during 1950s and 1960s, village studies were not completely 'gender blind'. Since the concept of gender and the accompanying theoretical issues had yet to be articulated, the social anthropologists did not look at man-woman relations in the manner in which it was to be conceptualised and studied later. However, many of the village monographs provide detailed accounts of the patterns of social relations between men and women in the rural society of India. Some of these monographs even have separate chapters devoted to the subject.

In the absence of a critical theoretical perspective and having been carried out largely within empiricistic perspectives, the village studies constructed gender and patriarchy as a 'natural order'. Further, accounts of man-woman relations provided in these studies were largely based on the data collected from male informants. Most of the anthropologists themselves being males, it would have been difficult

for them to be able to meet and participate in the 'private' life of the village people. Some of them were aware of this lacuna in their field-work. Recalling his experiences in a Kashmir village Madan confessed:

I never was able to meet with all the women but only with young girls and relatively old women. . . . This limitation was never overcome and undoubtedly affected the quality of the material I was able to obtain. . . . (Madan, 1975:141).

Even where they were able to meet women, the male anthropologists could not make the women speak. As Majumdar admits:

When we discussed their husbands with the women, they never opened out, and any question regarding their future, they would avoid answering, saying that they did not know, or we should ask their husbands (Majumdar, 1958: 205).

However, despite these obvious limitations, there are extensive descriptions of the relations and differences between men and women in the 'village studies' and these references provide a useful source not only for critiquing Indian social anthropology, but perhaps also for reconstructing the social structure of patriarchy in rural India during the early years of Independence.

Most village studies constructed gender relations within the framework of the household, and participation of women in work. These studies highlighted the division of labour within the family and the overall dominance that men enjoyed in the public sphere. Women, particularly among the upper castes, were confined within the four walls of the house. 'The social world of the women was synonymous with the household and kinship group while the men inhabited a more heterogeneous world' (Srinivas, 1976:137). Compared to men, in a central Indian village studied by Mayer, 'women had less chance to meet people from other parts of the village. The village well provided a meeting place for all women of non-Harijan castes, and the opportunity for gossip. But there was a limit to the time that busy women could stand and talk while they drew their water and afterwards they must return home, where the occasions for talking to people outside their own household were limited to meeting with other women of the street' (Mayer, 1960: 136). In the Telangana village also, Dube observed that women were secluded from the activities of the public space. 'It was considered a mark of respectability in women if they walked with their eyes downcast' (Dube, 1955: 18).

Friendship in the village was recognised as a relationship that did not always operate along caste lines though it usually developed among

people of equal social and economic status. Gender was significant here too. While for boys friendships lasted to mature years, girls were often married away, and after marriage so completely absorbed in their households that they rarely took interest in forming new friendships within the community into which they were married (Sarma, 1960: 195). Because of their limited social experience, women could not develop some of the important skills that most men could without any formal training. In the Deccan village, for example, while almost all men were bilingual, only a few women could speak any language other than their mother tongue (Dube, 1955: 19).

The rules of patriarchy were clearly laid out. After caste, gender was the most important factor that governed the division of labour in the village. Masculine and feminine pursuits were clearly distinguished (Dube, 1955:169). In Shivapur, the village he studied, Ishwaran wrote:

The world of men and women . . . are totally segregated. The sexes are first of all physically segregated. Women work in the home, men at home or in the field. At public meetings, women sit in one corner, or in an adjoining room. Women have one place and kind of social activity, men another. Women worship at certain times and places and in certain ways, men in others. Men participate actively in politics; women, to the extent they do participate, do so passively (Ishwaran, 1968: 34).

Writing on similar lines about his village in the same region, Srinivas pointed out that the two sets of occupations were not only separated but also seen as unequal:

It was the male head of the household who carried on the traditional caste occupation, be it agriculture, smithy, trade or priesthood. And there was unstated assumption that his occupation was important one and that all other activities of the household either supplementary or subordinate. This assumption was the principle on which the household activities were organized. Thus while it was the man's job to raise the crop, it was the woman's to look after his food and comfort (Srinivas, 1976: 137).

It was the man who exercised control over the domestic economy. He made the annual grain-payments at harvest to the members of the artisan and servicing castes who had worked for him during the year.... Women were thought to be incapable of understanding what went on outside the domestic wall (ibid., 140-41).

Men also controlled the sexuality of women. In the monogamous family, popular among most groups in India,

the ideal was that the husband and wife should be faithful to each other but villagers took a far more serious view of the wife's lapses.

A man could play around but not so a woman. A man's sense of private property in his wife's genital organs was as profound as in his ancestral land. And just as, traditionally, a wife lacked any right to land she lacked an exclusive right to her husband's sexual prowess. Polygyny and concubinage were both evidence of her lack of such rights. Men and women were separate and unequal (ibid., 155).

Patriarchy and male dominance was legitimised by traditional norms. Dube writes:

According to the traditional norms of the society a husband is expected to be an authoritative figure whose will should always dominate the domestic scene. As the head of the household he should demand respect and obedience from his wife and children. The wife should regard him as her 'master' and should 'serve him faithfully' (Dube, 1955: 141).

While femininity in the rural society of India was constructed in terms of submission and privacy, maleness was seen in terms of power and control over the women as well as the ability to provide for a family. 'A "manly" husband kept his wife under control. She was not supposed to talk back to him or sulk or nag unduly'(ibid., 155).

As an institution, family was quite strong in the village society. Family was idealised as a group working with solidarity and cooperation. The institution of family was also supposed to work 'as a model for the whole community'. The ideal family, it was emphasised,

should work on the principle of 'one for all and all for one'. Different members of the family should function like an organized team, and have mutual trust and understanding. Toleration, goodwill and a sense of give-and-take among its members are for the well-being and prosperity of the family (Dube, 1955: 138).

The most important for the family was its privacy and women were invested with responsibility of guarding it. A woman was expected to submit and tolerate her husband even if he was violent. 'If the husband beats the wife, her crying should not be loud enough to attract curious sympathisers into the house'(ibid.,139). However, the ideology of family was considerably 'diluted' as one went down in the caste hierarchy so much so that among the lower castes it was difficult to find any traces of these ideals.

Gender and Caste

Gender inequalities intermingled with those of caste. The ideology of caste governed the relationships among the men and women of various caste groups. The most significant way in which caste ideology of purity-impurity influenced women in specific was the attitude of the upper caste families towards the monthly menstrual cycle of women. Menstruation led to their temporary impurity and their segregation from the rest of the family. Mandelbaum pointed out that it was strongly believed among the upper castes that during their menstrual cycle 'women must be secluded and should take care to avoid being seen by a priest and must not approach anything which was sacrosanct, whether it be a temple or the hearth of kitchen' (Mandelbaum, 1955: 230).

The menstrual impurity of women did not mean only a temporary seclusion of women within the household, it also had wider implications. It defined the relationship of the upper caste women with the men of the servicing castes. For example, a washerman considered it beneath his status to wash the clothes of the women of his patron's family. 'No washerman would personally handle the menstrual *saree* from the patron and wash. This job was done by the washerman's wife. These clothes were washed separately. Similarly the dresses of the mother of a new-born child were also washed by the washerwomen' (Srinivas, 1976: 146).

The caste differences also influenced women's participation in work. However, there was an inverse relationship between the status of the caste and position of women and their participation in public life. 'The income of a household, and the degree to which its style of life was Sanskritised, were significant in determining whether women participated in agricultural work or not. Generally women from the richest households and the highest castes remained confined to their homes while women from the poorest households and lowest castes worked outside for cash wages' (Srinivas, 1976: 137). Gough, in her study of Tanjore villages also observed that agricultural labour was valued more among the untouchables and consequently the status of women within the family among these castes was higher than among the middle and the upper castes. Women also contributed a higher proportion of their earnings to the household than did men. Men spent money on tea shops, on tobacco for chewing, and occasionally

on bus rides or cinema tickets. Women chewed tobacco less than men and seldom entered tea shops, rode buses or saw a film (Gough, 1989: 305). Similarly Majumdar found that the lower caste women could 'violate' the rules of patriarchy more comfortably while the upper caste women were more 'conformist'.

... Chamar women work as wage labourers quite often, but they seldom give their earning to their husbands. This is contrary to the accepted custom and canons of social behaviour. . . . Chamar women go against the accepted domestic rules in another way too, for they sometimes eat their food before their husbands have eaten theirs, whereas among other castes women generally partake of their food only after the husbands have finished their meal (Majumdar, 1958: 205).

In the Telangana village also, among the potters, both men and women could work on the wheel and the same was true of the washermen's caste, while among the Brahmins, only men performed priestly functions and women had no share in this task. Similar was the case with the other upper castes where 'the respective fields of men and women were well defined' (Dube, 1955:1 72). However, the women among upper castes too were not completely powerless. Though they had to bear the 'burden of tradition' much more than their counterparts among the lower castes, they also influenced the decision making in the household through the strategies that Scott described as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). They 'had certain well developed techniques for making known their views: they would go into long sulks, refuse food, nag continuously, appeal to elderly kinsmen over the head of the husband, and so on' (Srinivas, 1976: 141). Similarly, in a few cases individual personality also mattered though in a limited way. 'A wife who had strong personality took over jobs that were not usually regarded as hers. But even she did not take over jobs which were exclusively men's (ibid., 147).

However, despite the extensive references that village studies provide on man-woman relations and also the repeated statements about the existing gender inequalities in the rural society of India, these differences were not seen or interpreted to provide a critical understanding of the social structure of patriarchy. On the contrary, some of these anthropologists saw these relations as being quite compatible with the social structure of the village. Constructing it in a completely harmonious system of role difference and interdependence, Ishwaran writes about his study village:

Shivapur is a man's world. Domination by men colours every aspect of life. But this remark, left unqualified, would be misleading. Certainly women do not feel themselves to be ill-treated. For every right that the man has he has a corresponding duty. For every duty that the woman has she has a corresponding right. . . . It is the duty of the man to lead, just as it is the duty of the woman to follow. It is also the duty of the man to accept responsibility, and the duty of woman to 'take no thought for the morrow' (Ishwaran, 1968: 34).

Such representations were obviously based on the information that these anthropologists gathered from their male informants. Though they saw themselves as neutral observers, their perspectives that constructed village as a community structured around the principle of interdependence and reciprocity ended up presenting gender inequalities in terms of functional role differentiation. The fact that these relations were also relations of domination and subordination sustained by the ideology of patriarchy was rarely pointed out even when their own data suggested that this was the case.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the 'self-image' of 'scientists' and a repeated emphasis on "value-neutrality" towards their subject-matter, a close reading of what these students of Indian village have written about their experiences in their villages during fieldwork provides a completely different picture. Apart from pointing to the kinds of problems they faced in getting information about the village social life from different sections of rural society, they give vivid descriptions of how their own location and social background influenced and conditioned their observations of the village society and their access to different sections of people in the rural society. The place they chose to live in the village during the fieldwork, the friends they made for regular information, the social class of the anthropologists, their gender, and perhaps most importantly, the caste status that the village bestowed upon them, all played important roles in the kind of picture they constructed of the village society.

The manner in which an individual anthropologist negotiated his/her relationship with the village determined who was going to be his/her informant. One of the first questions that an anthropologist was asked when he/she first visited the village was regarding his/her caste background. Accordingly the village placed the visitor in its own structure and allocated him/her a place and status. The anthropologist

was not only expected to respect this allocation of status bestowed on him/her by the village, but he was also asked to conform to the normative patterns of the caste society. The anthropologist could not avoid negotiating with the village social structure mainly because the method of participant observation required that he/she went and stayed in the village personally for a fairly long period of time. The routine way of developing contact with the village was through the village leaders or the head of the panchayat who invariably came from the dominant upper caste. Most of the anthropologists themselves being from upper caste and middle class background, it was easier for them to approach and develop rapport with these leaders. This also helped them execute their studies with lesser difficulties. Majumdar is explicit about this:

The ex-zamindar family provided accommodation and occasionally acted as the host, and this contact helped . . . to work with understanding and confidence; little effort was needed to establish *rapport* (Majumdar, 1958: 5).

Moreover, in an Indian village during the fifties and sixties, only the richer upper caste landowners could have provided accommodation to the visiting anthropologist. The low caste rural poor rarely had enough housing even for their own requirements. However, finding a place to live was not merely a matter of convenience. It identified the investigator with certain groups in the village and this identification had its advantages as well as disadvantages. While it gave them access to the life ways of the upper castes, it also made them suspect in the eyes of the lower castes. Recognising the significance of this, Shah, who did a study of 'the household dimensions of family' in rural Gujarat, writes:

. . . the village headman arranged a house for our stay during our first visit to the village. We could not exercise our choice in this matter. When we had to vacate this house and find another, again we could not exercise our choice. The latter house was also located in the same ward as did the former. . . . This ward was populated mostly by three upper castes, Brahmins, Rajputs and Patidars, and most of the village leaders, including the headman, lived there. Our living in this ward gave us certain advantages as well as disadvantages. The main advantage was that we could observe the village leaders more closely. . . . The main disadvantage was that we could not observe as closely the untouchables (Shah, 1979: 35).

Others also had similar experiences. The Tamil village that Beteille studied, was divided into three clearly demarcated residential areas

on the basis of caste. He was "permitted" to live in a Brahmin house in the *agraharam* (the Brahmin locality), 'a privilege', he was told, 'never extended to an outsider and a non-Brahmin before'. However, his acceptance in the *agraharam* as a co-resident was on certain implicit conditions.

I could live in the *agraharam* only on certain terms, by accepting some of the duties and obligations of a member of the community.... The villagers of Sripuram had also assigned me a role, and they would consider it most unnatural if I decided suddenly to act in ways that were quite contrary to what was expected (Beteille, 1975: 104).

This, Beteille himself recognised, had serious implications for his field work. The residents of the *agraharam* had their own perspectives on the village. For them, Sripuram was primarily their own locality. His village had over three hundred houses, while those who lived in the *agraharam* counted only about a hundred. For them the village meant only the *agraharam*. This process of exclusion operated not merely in the counting of heads, but also in other, more subtle, ways 'which often go unnoticed by the fieldworker who stayed only for a short while in the village' (Beteille, 1996: 277).

Living in the *agraharam* also gave him an identity of a Brahmin in the village. 'I was identified with Brahmins by my dress, my appearance, and the fact that I lived in one of their houses' (ibid., 9). For the non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas, he was just another Brahmin from North India. This meant that his access to these groups was therefore, far more limited than to the Brahmins' (ibid., 9). His visits to the Harijan locality received loud disapproval from his Brahmin hosts and he was also suspected by the Harijans.

The village was not only caste conscious, it was also gender conscious. Underlining the role gender played in 'fieldwork', Leela Dube, one of the few Indian women anthropologists who worked in a village writes, 'I was a Brahmin and a woman, and this the village people could never forget' (Dube, 1975: 165).

Srinivas tells a similar story about his experiences in the field. Since his family originally came from the region where he did his field study, it was easier for his villagers to place him. For the villagers he 'was primarily a Brahmin whose joint family owned land in a neighbouring village' (Srinivas, 1976: 33). The older villagers gave him the role of a Brahmin and a landowner. By so doing they were able to make him behave towards them in certain predictable ways, and they

in turn were able to regulate their behaviour towards him.

As a 'successful' participant observer, he could get himself accepted in the village to such an extent that on social occasions almost everyone in the village treated him as a Brahmin. He tells us, 'However poor the host, I was given a green coconut and a cash-gift (*dakshina*) of eight annas or a rupee' (ibid., 35). He also participated as a 'learned Brahmin' whenever the village had its *puja* (the ritual cermonies). Almost all his friends in the village were from the dominant social groups.

More significant here, perhaps, is the fact that he very consciously confirmed to the normative patterns and the local values as he came to understand them.

It did not even occur to me to do anything which might get me into trouble with the village establishment. I accepted the limitations and tried to work within them (ibid., 47 emphasis added).

A similar kind of anxiety is expressed by Leela Dube when she writes:

(I)f I had to gain a measure of acceptance in the community, I must follow the norms of behaviour which the people associated with my sex, age, and caste (Dube, 1975: 165).

Despite its obvious advantages, the method of participant-observation also imposed certain limitations on the field workers that eventually proved critical in shaping the image they produced of the Indian village. Doing participant observation required a measure of acceptability of the field worker in the village that he/she chose to study. In a differentiated social context, it was obviously easy to approach the village through the dominant sections. However, this choice proved to be of more than just a strategic value. The anxiety of the anthropologist to get accepted in the village as a member of the 'community' made their accounts of the village life conservative in orientation. It also limited their access to the dominant groups in the local society. They chose to avoid asking all those questions or approaching those subordinate groups, which they thought, could offend the dominant interests in the village. The choices made by individual anthropologists as regard to how they were going to negotiate their own relationship with the village significantly influenced the kind of data they could gather about village life. Unlike the 'tribal communities', the conventional subject matter of social anthropology, Indian villages were not only internally differentiated much more than the tribes, they also

had well articulated world views. Different sections of the village society had different perspectives on what the village was. Though most of the anthropologists were aware of this, they did not do much to resolve this problem. On the contrary, most of them consciously chose to identify themselves with the dominant caste groups in the village, which apart from making their stay in the village relatively easy, limited their access to the world-view of the upper castes and made them suspect among the lower castes. It was not just the caste system that was constructed as a 'natural order of things', gender differences too were viewed in the same kind of perspective. Despite documenting and extensively referring to the differences and inequalities marking man-woman relations in the village, hardly anyone attempted to project them as relations of power and domination or attempted to understand them in a critical perspective.

Nearly universal acceptance of structural-functionalism in the two disciplines played its own role in over emphasising the need to understand what produced order. It also asked for a value-neutral position on the part of the researchers *vis-a-vis* the social context being studied. The functionalist theory saw the process of change in the Third World societies in terms of a transformation of the traditional social order into a modern society that would resemble the societies of the West. This dichotomous framework of 'modernisation theory' re-imposed the colonial presumption that the Indian village, above all, was a concrete example of the traditional social order. Village studies were seen to be an exercise in unpacking this traditional order. There were no attempts to critically examine the popular concepts at the time and their sources. 'Village', 'caste', 'tribe', 'religion', 'tradition', 'civilisation' or even '*jajmānī* system', were all taken over from the earlier colonial discourses on India by the social anthropologists without any apparent reflections or hesitations.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Inden 1990; Dumont 1970; Breman 1987; Cohn 1987.
2. See, for example, Dumont and Pocock 1957; Srinivas 1955b; 1987; Pocock 1960; Breman *et al.* 1997.
3. See, for example, Appadurai, 1988.

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