

The Myth of Self-Sufficiency Of the Indian Village

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THE idea of the isolation and self-sufficiency of the Indian village was first propounded by Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1830, and since then it has had distinguished supporters, scholars as well as politicians. Sir Henry Maine and Karl Marx supported the idea, and in recent times, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers not only stated that Indian village was traditionally self-sufficient but also wanted a political programme which would restore to these villages their pristine self-sufficiency. We make no apology for giving below a lengthy quotation from Sir Charles Metcalfe's writing in which he propounds his famous theory of the self-sufficiency and vitality of the Indian village:

"The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo. Pathan. Moghul. Mahratta. Sikh, English, are all masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble they arm and fortify themselves: a hostile army passes through the country: the village communities collect their cattle within their walls and let the enemy pass unprovoked. If plunder and devastation be directed against themselves, and the force employed be irresistible, they flee to friendly villages at a distance; but when the storm has passed over, they return and resume their occupations. If a country remain for a series of years the scene of continued pillage and massacre, so that the villages cannot be inhabited, the scattered villagers nevertheless return whenever the power of peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away, but the succeeding generation will return. The sons will take the places of their fathers; the same site for the village, the same positions for the houses, the same lands, will be reoccupied by the descendants of those who were driven out when the village was depopulated; and it is not a trifling matter that will drive them out, for they will often maintain their post through times of dis-

turbance and convulsion, and acquire strength sufficient to resist pillage and oppression with success".

MAINE, TO MARX

About forty years later, Sir Henry Maine revived the idea of the self-sufficiency of the Indian village:

"For the most part, the Indian village communities have always submitted without resistance to oppression by monarchs surrounded by mercenary armies.... I have several times spoken of them as organised and self-acting. They, in fact, include a nearly complete establishment of occupations and trades for enabling them to continue their collective life without assistance from any person or body external to them"²

Karl Marx, from whom one could have expected a departure from the conventional view, also popularised the concept of village self-sufficiency:

"Under this form of municipal government, the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial. The boundaries of the village have been but seldom altered, and though the villages themselves have been sometimes injured and even desolated by war, famine and disease, the same name, the same limits, the same interests, and even the same families have contributed for ages. The inhabitants gave themselves no trouble about the breaking up and the division of kingdoms; while the village remains entire, they care not to what power it is transferred or to what sovereign it devolves: its internal economy remains unchanged."

PART OF WIDER SYSTEM

When an idea is over a hundred years old and is advocated by thinkers as diverse as Maine and Marx it nearly acquires the status of a dogma. Until recently, most writers on rural India look for granted the idea of village autonomy and autarky. This has resulted in falsifying the true nature of the Indian village 'community, and has provided a basis for revivalists' and Utopians' programme of political action. It is only in the last twenty years or so that trained anthropologists and

sociologists have made intensive studies of village communities in different parts of India and in some areas they have been lucky enough to come across historical data. The picture that emerges from these data is that while roads, especially inter-village roads, were very poorly developed, while monetization of the rural economy was minimal, and while the locally dominant caste could lay down the law on many matters, the village was always a part of a wider economic, political and religious system. The appearance of isolation, autonomy and self-sufficiency was only an illusion.

In some parts of the country like coastal Kerala, Coorg, highland Gujarat and elsewhere nucleated villages do not exist. The 'village' in these areas consists of a number of distinct farms with every owner of a farm or his representative living on his farm. The dispersed village is not a clear, architectural entity like the nucleated village. There, is no clear boundary between one village and another. The members living in it are served by artisan and servicing castes from several dispersed villages. That is, each artisan caste serves a distinct group of villages, and the village may be represented by a series of partially overlapping circles"

The administrative and 'social' villages are not always identical even in areas with nucleated settlements. An administrative village occasionally includes more than one social village while a social village is more rarely divided into more than one administrative village.

AGNATES DISPERSED

A village is a vertical unit composed of sections of various caste while a caste is a horizontal unit made up of different sections living in several neighbouring villages. The members of a caste living in a village are bound by ties of kinship, marriage, economic obligations, and membership of caste panchayat with their caste-fellows in other villages. Even in south India where cross-cousin and crossniece marriages are preferred, the marriage field for a rural caste includes at least twenty to thirty vil-

lages. The field is much bigger in north India where relatives are not preferred for marriage. In addition, there is village exogamy and occasionally, village hypergamy. That is, a man may not marry a girl of his own village, and he is not permitted to give his sister or daughter in marriage to the village from which he has obtained a wife. The marriage circle in the north includes two or three hundred villages.

The members of an agnatic clan are often found dispersed in several villages. This is specially true of some parts of north India where members of the locally dominant caste residing in several neighbouring villages are agnatically related to each other. Close ties exist between such groups. Similarly, close ties also exist between those members of a caste who live in towns and others who live in villages. This is specially true of the 'twice born castes.

The fact that villages are usually multicaste in composition is pointed out as evidence of self-sufficiency of villages. But even big villages, villages with over a thousand people, do not contain all the necessary castes whereas nearly two thirds of India's villages have a strength of less than five hundred each.

WEEKLY MARKETS

There are also single-caste villages. Where these villages are of artisans, they sell their goods in nearby towns, or more frequently, in the weekly markets. The latter are an eloquent testimony to the Indian village's lack of self-sufficiency. They also imply a certain amount of monetization of the economy which in turn means that the village was part of a wider politico-economic system.

Weekly markets again vary in their range. Some are patronised by people living in a few neighbouring villages while others are patronised by people spread over a wide area. Occasionally, there is also a certain amount of specialisation in weekly markets: one market is famous for trade in cattle, another in sheep and poultry, a third in woollen blankets, and so on. Pilgrimages also take the villager beyond the village, and occasionally into a different language area. The periodical festival of a deity attracts devotees and others from nearby villages, and a bazaar springs up around the temples. The prospect

of buying and selling at the festival is as strong an attraction as the religious one. There are fairs which are famous for the sale of cattle, and nowadays, cattle are moved by lorry a distance of two or three hundred miles to reach a fair. Such fairs occur all over the country and they reveal the fact that the peasant's social and economic universe is very much wider than his village.

PATTERN OF LAND OWNERSHIP

The pattern of land-ownership, tenancy and labour frequently cuts across the village. The land which is included within the boundary of an official or administrative village is not always owned by those resident in it. Some of the land is usually owned by people in neighbouring villages or towns. During the last hundred years or more, there has come into existence a class of absentee landowners, of people who reside in towns but own land in villages.

Again, members of a village are commonly found to own some land in neighbouring villages. Even tenants and labourers are occasionally found cultivating land lying in another village. In some irrigated areas where the density of population is high, it is not unknown for a tenant to cultivate land lying six or seven miles from where he is staying.

EXTERNAL TRADE

It is often assumed that trade and commerce did not touch villages in India. This assumption was perhaps true only of villages in the tribal areas. In the non-tribal areas, however, village economy has for a long time been integrated in varying degree with regional, national and even international trade and commerce, in certain regions, such as Gujarat, and the Kerala and Coromandel coasts, there was a high degree of integration of village economy with the economy of the wider world. These coastal areas had maritime commerce with overseas countries since at least the beginning of the Christian era.

The exports of Gujarat included, for instance, agricultural and forest produce as well as finished goods. In the former category may be mentioned indigo, cotton, wheat, rice, tobacco, edible oil, ghee, honey, lac, hides, dried ginger and myrobalan. In the latter category there were goods of three kinds: firstly, goods such as cotton cloth, yarn, cushions,

canopies, carpets and cotton tape, which were manufactured mostly by urban artisans but the raw materials; for which were supplied by villagers; secondly, goods such as precious stones which were manufactured by urban artisans from indigenous minerals; and thirdly, goods such as silk cloth and objects of metal and ivory which were manufactured by urban artisans from imported raw materials."

INTER-REGIONAL TRADE

The inter-regional trade of the country also included the exchange of agricultural and forest produce. Gujarat, for instance, received a considerable quantity of wheat and opium from Malwa, rice and coconuts from the Konkan, sugar from Bengal, and groceries and drugs from the Himalayan regions.⁶ Within Gujarat itself there was local specialisation in the matter of crops, and there was much exchange of agricultural produce between different areas. While indigo and tobacco were grown in central Gujarat, sugarcane was grown in south Gujarat. The local produce was transported over land as well as water. There was a great deal of trade along the coast of Gujarat. Saurashtra and Kulch.⁷ Finally, even in the same locality villages supplied several consumption goods to towns.

In brief, most villages in Plains Gujarat sent out some commodity or other to the wider market. They received in return various goods such as salt, spices, groceries, certain kinds of cloth, metals, metal objects, household goods, and ornaments. The dependence of the villager on the outside world was visible particularly during the *rites des passage*, the periodical festivals and other ritual occasions. The villager purchased the goods he wanted from the village shopkeeper, from the peripatetic trader or artisan, and at fairs and weekly markets. According to available records there was at least one shopkeeper in every village with a population of 500 or more in central Gujarat at the beginning of the nineteenth century.'

DEPENDENCE ON TOWNS

The villagers also depended upon towns for certain specialized services. Whenever they wanted to build a brick-and-mortar structure, whether it was a dwelling house, a well or a hospice (*dharmasala*), a village meeting house (*chavadi*), or a pigeon-tower (*chabuturi*), they had

to call in brick-layers and lime-workers from nearby towns. They also get their gold and silver ornaments made by a town smith. Though mud pots and pans were popular in the house, the few metal vessels which were in use, and the immense metal utensils for cooking community dinners, were bought and repaired in the town. The florist, the tailor, the washerman, the vahivancha (genealogist) and the grain parcher were all to be found only in the towns and very large villages.

In this connection, it is necessary to stress the importance of regional economic history, a field which is as important as it is neglected. The study of economic history on a regional basis will tell us how the village was related to the wider economy—national as well as international—in different parts of India. For instance, the American Civil War resulted in the stoppage of the supply of raw cotton to the factories in Lancashire, and this resulted in India's becoming an exporter of raw cotton to Britain. Cotton brought prosperity to peasants in Gujarat and in the former Central Provinces, which in turn led to several changes in the social and economic life of the people. Some peasants in the Central Provinces used silver in their ploughs and bullock-carts to tell their friends they had "arrived".

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The assumption that the Indian village community was not influenced by, and did not in turn influence, the wider political structure, is also facile. This assumption is a result of looking only at the top and not at the base of the political structure, a result of concentrating on the history of kings and generals and not of the people. At the village or slightly higher level, there was usually the dominant caste, the members of which owned a good deal of the available arable land, and also wielded political power in addition. Each such caste had a leader whose position was further strengthened by ties of kinship and affinity, and by his capacity to confer favours on his clients. Such chieftains stood at the base of the political pyramid everywhere in India. Above them was the Raja or king, the viceroy of an Emperor, and the Emperor himself, in ascending order of importance.

The lower-level authority acknowledged the supremacy of the higher authority when he paid tribute, and declared his independence from the latter when he stopped payment. There was a continuum of power relations from the lowest to the highest levels, and changes at each level were followed by changes at the other levels. In 'orthodox' histories changes at the higher levels are said to be the cause of change at lower levels, but not the other way about.

RAJPUTS AND MUSLIMS

Before the conquest of Gujarat by the Muslims in thirteenth century, the Rajputs were a dominant caste over the entire region and Rajput chieftains were to be found everywhere.¹⁰ When the Muslim conquerors removed the sovereign king of Gujarat all the lower chieftains fought the Muslims. The Persian chronicles, *Mirat-i-Sikandari*,¹¹ *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*¹² and *Ferista*¹ bear eloquent testimony to the relentless fight put up by the local Rajput chieftains (called Girasiyas) and their allies, the Koli chieftains, for over 400 years. It was only in central Gujarat, in the region around the capital city of Ahmedabad, the centre of Muslim power, that the Muslims were able to control the Rajputs. Three-fourths of the landed estate of each Rajput was confiscated and turned into *khalsa* or crown land. This marked the beginning of change in the position of Patidars, the great peasant caste of central Gujarat, *vis-a-vis* the Rajputs.

The decline in the power and wealth of the Rajputs was marked by the rise to wealth of the Patidars. They exported indigo, cotton and other agricultural commodities, and provided raw materials to urban artisans for the manufacture of such articles as cotton textiles. In course of time the Patidars acquired political power also. It is interesting to note that the Patidars were the principal supporters of the Marathas during the latter's campaign in Gujarat.¹⁴ And gradually the Patidars asserted their ritual superiority to Rajputs. At the present moment, Patidars do not accept water or cooked food from Rajputs.

WINDS FROM WITHOUT

We have already mentioned how pilgrimages and festivals took the villager to places beyond his own village. Apart from this, his reli-

gion embraced the whole of India, and at least the more knowledgeable villager had heard of Benaras, the Ganges and the Himalayas. The Brahmin priest was the visible representative of all-India or Sanskrit Hinduism. The institution of *Harikatha* in which the priest read and explained a religious story from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* or *Bhagavata* to the villagers enabled the latter to absorb all-India Hinduism. This helped in the gradual Sanskritisation of the lower castes and in making villagers everywhere an effective part of all-India Hinduism.

The Indian village was thus always a part of a wider entity, subject to the winds which blew from without. The incredibly bad roads, the heavy monsoon, the growing of food crops and vegetables, the existence of barter and the powerful sense of membership of the village community have all given students an illusion of self-sufficiency and of isolation. But it is only an illusion and the reality is quite different. It is, of course, true that villages in different parts of India were integrated in different degree with the wider political, economic, kinship, religious and ethical structure, and this is an important field for comparative research. Further, it is a field in which sociologists and historians have to cooperate.

Notes and References

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⁴ See Erie Miller. "Caste and Territory in Malabar", *American Anthropologist*, 56, (1954), pp 410-20.

⁶ W H Schoff. translated and annotated by. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, (New York, 1912), pp 39-42; *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol VI (Bombay, 1880K pp 187-98; Ral Krishna, *Commercial Relations between India and England*, (London, 1924), pp 12-17; W H Moreland *India at the Death of Akhar*, (London, 1920), pp 196-245; *id.*

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⁶ W H Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar*, p 244; *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol VI, pp 187-98.

⁷ See chapters on "Trade and Manufacture" and "Places of Interest" in *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol II (Bombay, 1877); Vol III, (Bombay, 1879); Vol IV, (Bombay, 1879); Vol VI, (Bombay, 1880); Vol VII, (Bombay, 1883); Vol VIII, (Bombay, 1884). An important source for the study of history of local trade in Gujarat are account books and commercial correspondence preserved by merchant families.

⁸ For a description of the records, see A M Shah, "Social Anthropology and the Study of Historical Societies", *The Economic Weekly*, Special Number, July 1959, pp 953-62.

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¹³ Mahomed Kasim Ferishta *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India*, translated by John Briggs, Vol IV, (Calcutta and London, 1910), p 18.

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