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Theorizing the Rural: Space, Identity, and Modernity in contemporary India

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Abstract— *Mahatma Gandhi, after returning from South Africa, said that "if the villages perish, India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost". This research paper examines how the construction of rural space, identity, and modernity in contemporary India transforms both sociological theory and rural policy. The objective is to critically analyse how traditional village studies and evolving rural realities intersect with modern development discourses. How these dynamics influence the configuration of rural identities and spaces. The study employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on critical textual analysis of foundational and contemporary village studies, policy documents, and ethnographic accounts. The research framework draws on multi-sited and political ethnographies to move beyond single-village analysis. It's specific focus on tracking interactions between villages and state institutions such as panchayats, local administrations, and development agencies. This approach aims to illuminate how narratives of the "village" are created. This also challenged, and redefined in present-day India, anchoring the analysis on the dynamic relationship between rural representation and development. Findings show that earlier studies treated villages as static, separate units, whereas recent work views them as fluid, socially constructed places. Here, identity, modernity, and development are always in negotiation. Insights from the sociology of space, postcolonial studies, and development theory reveal that the village is shaped by both state policies and changes such as migration, globalization, and new social aspirations. The study concludes that viewing villages through these new lenses is vital for understanding rural change and shaping better development policies.*

Keywords— ***India, Village, Issues, Social structure, Change.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The notion of the Indian village as central to Indian society mostly came from colonial ways of studying and describing it (Cohn, 1997). In colonial times, the village was seen as more than just a local administrative unit. It became important in debates about theory and history. Thinkers such as Henry Sumner Maine, Karl Marx, and B. H. Baden-Powell saw the Indian village as a key to understanding Indian society, not just as a tool for colonial rule.

By the nineteenth century, the Indian village had come to embody multiple meanings: it was seen as an ancient and primary core of Indian civilization, a self-governing political and administrative unit, and an economically self-sufficient community. It was characterized by subsistence agriculture, low-level technology, simple crafts and services, and by a sense of social and physical immobility deeply tied to the land (Breman, 1997). These features gave the idea of the Indian village a specific ideological shape rooted in colonial thought.

Interestingly, these colonial constructions later influenced Indian nationalist thinking as well. In the search for a distinct national identity, the village began to be celebrated as the repository of India's cultural and civilizational values. Even after the British shifted their focus from the village to caste as the main analytical category for understanding Indian society, the notion of the "self-

sufficient village republic" continued to dominate nationalist imagination. Once the village became symbolic of the nation itself, it was repeatedly idealized and romanticized. Nationalist discourse portrayed the village as the true heart of India—an emblem of its "golden past," representing equality, simple democracy, and harmonious social life (Dumont, 1970).

Ideologically, the image of the Indian village—with all its idealized virtues—served as a contrast to the much-criticized system of caste, which was seen as rigid and hierarchical. For Indian nationalists, this romantic vision of the village became a powerful symbol that offered confidence in India's ancient civilizational unity and continuity. In this way, the village played an important ideological role in shaping nationalist thought and identity.

Alongside this nationalist fascination, new theoretical and methodological directions in anthropology led which later became known as the "village studies" tradition in Indian sociology and social anthropology. Inspired partly by the community studies carried out in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, Indian scholars began to focus intensely on rural life. The village was viewed as a natural point of convergence where both caste relations and peasant life could be examined together. It offered a convenient setting to understand how social hierarchy and economic practices interacted in everyday life.

Although many of these studies were more concerned with analyzing caste than with understanding the lives of peasants themselves (Heesterman, 1985). The wave of village sketches and monographs that followed became a hallmark of Indian sociology and anthropology for several decades.

After Independence, the village was reimagined as a model for national reconstruction. It was examined for planned social transformation Prof. Dube (1964) called it "directed cultural change." The post-colonial state boosted rural development programs, and tried to place the village at the center of its modernization agenda. Sociologists and anthropologists also continued to view the village as the best site for studying India's peasant society and culture (Redfield, 1955).

However, the same qualities that had once made the village a symbol of moral virtue it's stability, simplicity, and self-sufficiency now looked as a sign of stagnation and backwardness. Policymakers believed that change had to be introduced from outside through state-led initiatives. Thus, the discourse of rural development represented a new phase that combined its earlier colonial, nationalist, and anthropological constructions. In this sense, as Breman (1997) suggests, the "village developmentalised" is a continuation of the "village colonised," the "village nationalised," and the "village anthropologised."

II. THE CHANGING RELEVANCE OF THE VILLAGE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

The central position that the village once held in early Indian sociology and social anthropology now appears increasingly unsettled in light of contemporary scholarship. Many recent scholars argue that the village has lost much of its sociological and cultural significance. As Gupta (2004: 11) notes, "the village is no longer a site where futures can be planned." He further observes that "the village is shrinking as a sociological reality, though it still exists as space" (Ibid: 9). According to Gupta, the village today holds little sway over India's national culture or political discourse. Both India's national culture or political discourse have become overwhelmingly urban in orientation. Despite the fact that more than half of the population of India still reside in villages, rural life leaves only a faint imprint on the nation's cultural imagination (Ibid: 20).

This shift is reflected even in the realm of popular culture. By the 1990s, mainstream cinema, once deeply rooted in romanticized depictions of village life, largely abandoned such portrayals. Films inclined to favor urban themes and aspirations. They were mirroring a broader disillusionment with the village as a moral or cultural ideal.

Jonathan Parry's (2004) ethnographic work among long-distance migrant workers at the Bhilai Steel Plant offers further evidence of this transformation. His research highlights how industrial modernity fosters a worldview that positions the village as a place of darkness—a mere "waiting room" to be escaped. For these workers, Bhilai represents progress, opportunity, and modern life, while the village stands for everything they wish to leave behind. Though it may still evoke fleeting nostalgia for imagined rural virtues such as purity, honesty, and simplicity, the village has come to symbolize social and moral backwardness.

Importantly, Parry (2004) suggests that the village is not merely the spatial opposite of Bhilai but rather its moral and ideological counterpoint. The village is not rejected in the dearth of modern infrastructure like electricity or roads, but for its perceived cultural deficiencies its conservatism, illiteracy, and supposed lack of civility. In this sense, both Gupta and Parry reveal how, in the contemporary Indian imagination, the village has lost its former symbolic prestige and is now viewed as peripheral to the narratives of modernity and national progress.

III. REIMAGINING THE VILLAGE: BETWEEN DECLINE AND RENEWAL

From a varied theoretical and ideological standpoint, Nandy (2001) also throw light to the diminishing presence of the village within India's creative and intellectual imagination in recent decades. According to Nandy, this decline represents not merely a social transformation but a symbolic shift in India's self-perception. The rejection of the village signifies the ascendancy of the colonial city. New self-image of India is associated with ideas of progress, history, and modernity while the village becomes the obsolete part of that identity. As he observes, the city emerges as "the new self, identified with history, progress, becoming" (Ibid: 13). In this formulation, the village no longer exists as an autonomous reality but functions as a conceptual counterpoint to the city a romantic or nostalgic construct, often imagined from an urban perspective. In effect, the village has turned into a dystopian space, symbolizing stagnation and obsolescence. It survives largely as a demographic category or statistical reference rather than as a vibrant social world. Like Gupta and Parry, Nandy too suggests that the vitality of the Indian village no longer animates the region's dominant visions of the future.

However, not all scholars share this sense of decline. Some continue to affirm the analytical and empirical value of village studies. Economist Barbara Harriss-White (2004: xxii), for instance, insists that "village studies are far too important to our understanding of economy and society to have atrophied in the way they seem to have done over the last decade." Similarly, in their edited volume *Village Matters*, Mines and Yazgi (2010: 3) lament that "villages are desperately lost objects in the anthropology of India." They argue that since the time of Louis Dumont, dominant theoretical trends emphasizing globalization, deterritorialization, and cultural flows have made it almost taboo to write about villages as meaningful social units, even though the majority of India's population continues to maintain strong connections to them—either as sites of daily life or as integral nodes in broader social and cultural networks.

While Mines and Yazgi advocate for a renewed engagement with village studies, they also recognize that the contemporary village can no longer be treated as a closed, self-contained entity. Villages today are not simply geographic settlements defined by population size or administrative boundaries, but complex social formations shaped by mobility, exchange, and translocal interactions. Their plea, therefore, is not for a return to the static village of the past, but for a reimagining of the village as a dynamic and interconnected site within a rapidly changing social landscape. The authors urge researchers to move beyond the purely factual or empirical focus typical of traditional village studies. They remind us to critically examine the theoretical assumptions that shape how the Indian village has historically been understood (Niranjana 1991: 373). These underlying assumptions often remain unspoken yet deeply influence sociological inquiry. As Niranjana points out, the village should not be viewed merely as an object of study but as a construct shaped through sociological discourse. It represents a discursive space where political and administrative strategies intersect and where diverse socio-cultural meanings of Indian society are negotiated.

Most sociological studies on villages have followed the norms of scientific empiricism, assuming the village as a given social reality rather than questioning its conceptual formation (Niranjana 1991: 377). Even scholars who focus on broader rural processes often treat the village as an objective and stable category, overlooking its discursive nature. Consequently, the village has been seen as a valid analytic unit with an empirical basis, rarely examined as something requiring explanation in itself. The dominant view within sociology has been to analyse rural social change, taking the village as the primary site where such transformations occur.

Although there is no single definition of the village due to its multiple dimensions, the concept generally includes ecological, occupational, and socio-cultural aspects. Ecologically, it describes a small, geographically bounded, and relatively isolated settlement. Occupationally, it comprises people whose livelihoods depend mainly on agriculture and related activities. Socio-culturally, the village is often portrayed as traditional, conservative, slow to change, and shaped by fatalistic values—an image long perpetuated in sociology textbooks.

In today's India, however, where rural life is often viewed with disillusionment, retaining an analytical framework centred on the village presents serious intellectual challenges. The village, once imagined as the symbol of the nation, is now frequently depicted as a site of despair, stagnation, and violence—a space evoked only in moments of crisis, such as farmer suicides or khap panchayat controversies. It appears as the opposite of development and modernity, seen as a barrier to industrial progress. Yet, as Merton (1968: 162–71) observed, shifts in empirical realities and new data necessarily provoke conceptual renewal. Therefore, continuing village studies without recognising the profound changes in the social and conceptual landscape of rural India would be misguided. The following discussion identifies one of the main forces redefining the Indian village and its associated meanings of rurality.

IV. THE STATE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF VILLAGE IDENTITY IN INDIA

The contemporary debate around rural development presents the village in a new light. Rural development discourse tends to promote a dominant or hegemonic understanding of what a village means. It reshape its meaning in both social and intellectual imagination. Whether or not development programs meet their intended goals. They still transform the language and ideas through which the village is described. In this discourse, the village becomes a marker of social difference often used to signify the extent or absence of development. It operates as a category of classification, situating the village in relation to the larger national project of development and modernization.

In this process, rural development discourse not only impacts how policymakers and scholars view the village but also influences how villagers themselves perceive it. The growing power of the state causes the gradual erosion of the village's older moral and social autonomy. As access to state resources and services increasingly depends on officially defined categories, the village starts to see itself through the lens of state bureaucracy. Consequently, the state's image of the village becomes the dominant frame that shapes understanding and policy. In modern times, the village is often transformed into what may be termed a "governmentalized locality."

Every rural development program implicitly carries a concept of the village within it. When such programs are designed and implemented, the state draws on selective, standardized images of rural life. These generalizations tend to collapse regional and cultural distinctions into a single, generic "village." Through this process, the village becomes a unified social category central to the state's development project. This merger between state-led development and the idea of the village has not received sufficient attention from Indian sociologists and anthropologists, who have traditionally focused on issues like community structure, political autonomy, and self-sufficiency. While the substance of these debates remains important, what has often been overlooked is the deep connection between development policies and the sociological representation of the village.

Although rural development has long been understood as a state-guided mechanism for social change, its conceptual effect has rarely been examined. In practice, scholars have usually treated the study of villages and the study of rural development as separate domains. Few have considered how the process of rural development itself constructs a specific, hegemonic image of the Indian village. Our argument emphasizes that state-driven development programs actively reproduce a particular version of "village India," framing how both outsiders and villagers themselves come to understand it.

In this context, the term village extends beyond its physical or demographic meaning. Within development discourse, the village is portrayed as the opposite of progress—defined by its supposed lack of development. This framing casts the village as inherently backward and in need of intervention. As a result, the expansion of development programs has reshaped popular and academic perceptions of what a village is. The very phrase "rural development" implies that the village has fallen short of an ideal standard that must be achieved. Over time, this association has transformed the notion of the village from a geographic space into a symbolic representation of a certain kind of people the rural poor or the underdeveloped.

Through these interventions, the state's presence becomes deeply embedded in the village landscape. Government agencies, officials, and programs spread across rural India, giving rise to an imagined, uniform "village India" a collective subject awaiting development. The shared condition of underdevelopment becomes the defining feature of village identity. Consequently, the relationship between the village and the state is increasingly expressed through the language of development. This incorporation of rural life into the state's developmental framework redefines villagers as citizens and transforms their everyday identity (Weber 1979; Ferguson 1990).

Moreover, this discourse produces a temporal hierarchy. Villages are seen as remnants of the past, while urban spaces and "developed" areas represent the future. As Gupta (2004: 7) notes, even though rural India has changed in many ways, conceptually the village continues to be imagined as belonging to the past. This mirrors the way the concept of "the native" functions in anthropology (Fabian 1983). The identity of the villager thus fuses with that of the place, representing a certain set of values and a distinct temporal location.

Although rural development seeks to modernize villages, it simultaneously reinforces their difference from developed spaces. In the developmental bureaucracy, development is viewed as the solution, while the village becomes the problem. This paradox is central to the logic of rural development: villages are both the targets and the margins of development efforts (Pigg 1992).

Still, the relationship between the state and the village is not entirely one-directional. While the state seeks to remake the village, the village also influences and reshapes the state (Breman 1997). Recent scholarship shows that rural

communities reinterpret and re-appropriate development policies within their own local contexts (Pigg 1992; Woost 1993; Tsing 1999; Moore 2000). Even so, the dominant narrative of rural development remains framed by the state's worldview.

Over the decades, the discourse of development has shaped how people imagine their social identities and differences. Political narratives such as the "Bharat versus India" debate (Joshi 1985, 1988) further intensify this divide, assigning contrasting identities to rural and urban populations. The concept of development thus becomes not only an economic or administrative idea but also a political tool for defining belonging, marginality, and entitlement. Villages increasingly articulate their position in national history through this developmental lens.

Historically, the growth of Indian sociology has been closely tied to the state's developmental agenda (Singh 1986). The prominence of village studies emerged largely because sociologists sought to contribute to national planning and modernization. Yet, these studies often overlooked how development itself shaped the village as a conceptual and lived category. The act of labelling a place a "village" is political—it defines who qualifies for state attention, resources, and representation. Understanding the village, therefore, requires examining not just rural life as a factual entity but also the ideological and political processes that produce it.

Ultimately, the idea of the village functions as a strategic representation within policy and public discourse. It serves as a field where identity, power, and resource claims are negotiated. Villagers themselves often adopt state-defined categories to assert rights and access opportunities. The term "rural," while appearing descriptive, is part of a broader discursive and political process through which individuals engage with the modern state (Harriss 2004: 147).

V. CONCLUSION

Village studies once held a prominent place in Indian sociology and anthropology, especially during the mid-20th century. However, in recent years, the tradition has seen a significant decline. This is partly because many later scholars treated village studies in a routine and formulaic way, paying excessive attention to documenting the daily social organization and behaviors of villagers rather than critically examining the concept of the village itself. The conventional approach often viewed the village as merely a convenient site for fieldwork, focusing more on issues like caste, occupations, kinship, and religious practices without reflecting deeply on the theoretical underpinnings of the "village" as a construct.

Such a narrow perspective neglected the importance of representations and ideals in shaping social realities. As Béteille (2003: 60-61) points out, societies engage with social life not only through concrete practices but also by aspiring towards certain ideals. This realization has led scholars to reconsider the methodological foundations of village studies. Most previous work saw the village as a fixed socio-spatial unit, existing primarily in contrast to the city and defined along demographic, ecological, or occupational lines. This missed out on examining how the village is also historically constructed and ideologically used.

Recent scholarship suggests that the village should not be treated as a static, bounded entity; instead, villages are best understood as dynamic social spaces shaped by factors such as gender, ecology, migration, state power, changing rural employment, and globalization. Analyzing villages in this way allows researchers to integrate topics such as diasporic ambitions, consumption cultures, and transformations in rural identity. As Jodhka (2012) notes, while most Indians remain strongly connected to villages, it is no longer necessary to treat them as isolated empirical realities. This evolving perspective encourages multi-sited ethnography—following the movements and interactions of villagers beyond just one location, rather than focusing on lifelong fieldwork within a single village.

Looking ahead, a renewed agenda for village studies may consider several possible directions. Investigating villages as sites shaped by colonial knowledge and power . It is revealing how the category "village" has been constructed through administrative and intellectual projects. Further, exploring the ways Indian nationalists appropriated and idealized villages. It is using them to symbolize traditional values or indigenous forms of democracy and socialism. This work Re-examining the link between villages and peasant societies in the light of changing agrarian conditions and the rise of non-farm employment in rural areas. I-Ithave been tried unpack contemporary thoughts of villages. It have seen them as repositories of tradition, spirituality, and environmental wisdom, especially in the work of NGOs and alternative movements (Nandy 2001).

Ultimately, village studies must reflect the changing political and cultural realities of villages in India, including new ways in which villages are represented and imagined. This includes considering how rural development and national discourses shape the idea of the village, and recognizing the emergence of 'authentic' village-like spaces even within urban centers like metropolitan India (Tarlo 1996).

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