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## The Indian Village Colonial Power, Historiography and Forms of Knowledge

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Recent scholarship on South Asia has distinctively brought to our attention the power relations of colonial categories, and the constructed and highly mediated nature of social and cultural historical experience. While focusing on the interpretation of power and knowledge in the colonial archive, they convincingly demonstrate the processes through which experiences of colonial modernity were constructed and organized into the lives of the colonized. The colonial state formation was not simply an episodic moment in the long historical journey of the Indian society. Rather, the practices, modalities and

projects of the colonial state constructed a new understanding of caste, tribes, religion, and the village. As Dirks puts it succinctly, 'the power of colonial discourse in India was not that it created whole new fields of meaning instantaneously but that it shifted old meanings slowly, sometimes imperceptively, through the colonial control of a whole range of institutions'.<sup>1</sup>

These theoretical and methodological shifts in the concerns of the anthropological practice, from the bounded spatial entities to 'the construction of cultural categories and the process of that construction', have yielded rich

insights illuminating the power relations of colonial history.<sup>2</sup> They have helped to interrogate processes by which official knowledge was produced. Not only do they foreground the implication and deployment of anthropological knowledge in all the administrative concerns but also reveal the creation of new subjectivities and political language. Even otherwise, a critical assessment of the legacy of colonial knowledge and its categories is more than an arcane question of representation. This legacy has posed great challenges to the postcolonial enterprise of nation building. In a way, 'the postcolonial

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predicament' remains rooted in the knowledge, assumptions and representational categories of colonial modernity notwithstanding political independence and decolonization. Evidently, anthropology can no longer claim an unmediated access to an objective social reality. Its prime task turns out to be a mapping of the discursive terrain in order to retrieve historical narratives that have a bearing on the contemporary context.<sup>3</sup>

We have come to appreciate the constitutive role of colonial 'investigative modalities' (conceptual categories and the assumptions underlying them) in the representation of Indian society as a series of facts. For the colonialists, the administrative power stemmed from an accurate knowledge and an efficient use of these facts. What recent studies have highlighted is that the forms applied to these facts were far from self-evident.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, we attempt to explore the ways in which colonial discourse brought about a fundamentally different view of Indian village, or rather where no view of village as a separate objective entity had existed ever before, there emerged an official view of Indian village.<sup>5</sup> Not only did the village occupy a prime place in colonial social morphology but also became enmeshed in the leading theoretical and historiographical debates of the day. It became the theoretical site where conceptual knots of some of the grandest evolutionary schema of the nineteenth century were sought to be resolved.

Given the theoretical, ideological and pragmatic salience of the village for the colonial rule, this paper looks at the colonial idiom of the village as a pretext to understand the history and character of colonial forms of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, the nineteenth century debate on the nature of the Indian village community has determined the nature of the discourse on the Indian village since then.<sup>7</sup> However, our intention is not to examine the facticity of the British accounts in relation to the

supposedly indigenous categories and forms of thought concerning the village. Rather than unravelling the distorting influence of colonial history and western social scientific categories, we endeavour to foreground the capacity of the colonial state to reconstruct fundamental aspects of Indian society—village in the instant case.

#### THE INDIAN VILLAGE: GENEALOGY OF A STEREOTYPE

The village has been at the centre of unending historiographical controversy being deeply embedded in the historical morass caused by the interlocking of land tenures with tax collection structures in an ancient order of civilization. The discrepancy between 'the British law and the Indian fact' has been as true of the village as of the other institutions.<sup>8</sup> Quite often, 'the legal description of the society failed to fit the economical and sociological'.<sup>9</sup> That does not, in any case, undermines the power of the colonial discourse to recast the village as the fundamental working unit of Indian society. The discovery of this cornerstone of society started mundanely, as the colonial administrators felt the need to collect and compile factual information about land settlements and revenue collection. Indeed, most of the characterizations of the village are contained in the despatches of senior British officers engaged in land revenue administration. One such despatch, which formed the basis for discussions in the British House of Commons in 1812-13 on the renewal of the East India Company's charter, outlined the idea of the village as a mini republic. More particularly, it is in Thomas Munro's report on the Ceded Districts of Madras (1806) that one comes across the initial stereotype of the village as a little republic.

Like his contemporaries, Munro was less concerned with the village as such than the mode of land settlement. His primary interest was to plead and win

the case for *ryotwari* settlement in the Madras Presidency as against Bengal Presidency's *permanent* settlement. In his acrimonious debate with Francis Ellis, he showed that his advocacy of *ryotwari* respects the principles of native tradition and that he was merely adhering to indigenous precedents. Once Munro became the Governor in 1820 and established *ryotwari* as the definitive legal basis for land settlements in the Madras Presidency, his formulations became part of the official wisdom.

Some of these administrative reports set the tone for future debate on the nature and character of Indian village. In the subsequent literature we find repetitions and variations on the same set of themes that formed part of the Fifth Report. What is noteworthy, however, is that the celebration of the Indian village is guided more by the ideology of particular administrator/s than the characteristics that the village actually displayed. Stokes identifies administrators, such as Munro (1761-1827), Malcolm (1769-1833), Elphinstone (1779-1859) and Metcalfe (1785-1846), who served under Lord Wellesley, the Governor General (1798-1805), as the chief proponents of the republican nature of the Indian village.<sup>10</sup> Munro was the leader and founder of this particular school of thought. While sharing a certain emotional kinship with the heritage of the past, these *Romantic Paternalists*, as Stokes labels them, were horrified at the wanton uprooting of an immemorial system of society. In their general political orientation, they were antithetical to the liberal attempt to anglicize, assimilate and reform Indian society. From their attitudes of romanticism and paternalism flowed a certain conservatism of thought that made them challenge and resist the policy of applying British constitutional principles to the Indian administration. In terms of routine administration it meant countering the spirit of Cornwallis system.

Whereas Munro was in favour of the *ryotwari* (cultivator-wise) system of land settlement, Metcalfe made a powerful advocacy of the *mahalwari* (village-wise) settlement. Madras and Bombay Presidencies largely followed *ryotwari*, but, in the Northwest provinces, Metcalfe ensured that the village communities were made the basis of revenue settlement.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, their advocacy for a particular type of revenue system was contingent on their political philosophy. Their opposition to the utilitarian *laissez-faire* was reflected in their attempts to preserve something of the methods and institutions of Indian society. Their opposition to the Cornwallis system was, in essence, an opposition to the imposition of English ideas and institutions on Indian society. In their attempt to cushion the impact of foreign dominion they resuscitated 'unchanging village republics' as a sign of their benevolent paternalism. Village communities provided them with a system of indirect rule without much meddling in Indian affairs. They firmly believed that the ultimate objective of their variant of land settlement was the protection of the (village) community by the government, and not against it. Fearful of the social effects of the sudden dissolution of the co-sharing village community, they were in favour of fitting the colonial administration to the native frame of society. Their awareness of the wholly artificial and foreign character of administration made them hesitant and wary of interfering with the prevailing forms of society. They were convinced that once law and order had been established and property rights in the soil defined and land revenue fixed in cash, there was no need to subject the village to disruptive changes and disastrous effects of the *Anglicization* drive. For them, *Anglicists* were responsible for setting aside the immemorial institutions of the native people and erecting in its place an incomprehensible

technical form of law that was unsuited to the native genius. In other words, these paternalists were all set to challenge the dominion exercised by utilitarianism and show that utilitarian principles were not of absolute and universal validity.<sup>12</sup> Since utilitarianism and its underlying principles were conditional truths by virtue of their historical origins, there was the urgent necessity of restraint in pressing Western reforms upon an oriental society like India. To them, unbridled utilitarianism only increased the danger of a rapid disintegration of Indian society. Munro went to the extent of advocating the restoration of the jurisdiction of the village panchayats so as to prevent the further erosion of this mainstay of the social order.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, the village community was, used as an argument against the generalization of Munro's *ryotwari*, both in Madras and in Delhi. Those who were in favour of *mauzawari* or *mahalwari* shared the apprehension that direct engagement for revenue with each separate landholder or cultivator (that is, *ryotwari*) might lead to the destruction of the original constitution of the village. Though the early administrative literature of the nineteenth century does not talk of the community, the stereotyping of the village emanates from its community character.

The colonial stereotyping of the village community had, thus, two principal ingredients: (1) the portrayal of the village as an idyllic and utopian political community—a society of equals, and (2) its characterization as a body of co-sharers of the soil. This emphasis on the village community as a political entity tended to ignore or, at least, underplay the facts of dominance and hierarchy within the village. The stability and isolation of the village and its political independence from the state were over-emphasized. Given the political fluidity that was evidenced at the macro-level, the permanence of the village held a great attraction.

Yet, this romanticized vision of the village was difficult to reconcile with the community it described. Although the disruptions of the later eighteenth century had enforced a great degree of self-reliance upon the Indian village, it was much less isolated from the state and the market, and much less egalitarian than what some of the administrators believed. The community of co-sharers in the land rarely encompassed the entire population. Surprisingly, when village was being substantially incorporated into a system of general law and colonial economy, its alleged virtues of political autonomy and economic self-reliance were gaining ground. This clearly reveals the elements of nostalgia in the way village was perceived by early colonial administrators.

In a way, the stereotyping of the village emanates from the quantum conceptual leap from the realm of economic self-sufficiency and internal organization to the supposed political independence of the village.<sup>14</sup> One does not find any reference to the existence of inequality in these early administrative accounts. This could be because inequality and hierarchy were considered to be natural and in tune with the spirit of the age. However, the village tends to acquire a metaphoric content as a 'republic', 'commonwealth', or 'state' by virtue of its being an ordered society in miniature.

The second aspect of the village stereotype, namely, that of a corporate body of persons sharing right in a common territory, is linked to the first one, for the idea of the village as a political community presupposes economic self-sufficiency. This view of the village finds its initial articulation in Ellis's *Report on Mirasi Rights* (1814).<sup>15</sup> Also, it is this aspect of the village community which was catapulted to the arena of high theory by Maine and Marx.

The essence of all such characterization of the village was a euphoric

celebration of its inner elasticity as a system. Romantic conservatives were attracted to its permanence, more so when it was seen in relation to highly volatile and fluid character of the Indian state. Its high degree of internal cohesion and enduring solidarity, and its constitution as the sum total of mutually dependent groups rather than mutually antagonistic classes, provided the romantics the raw material on which to construct their image of the Indian village. In the inner-directed, tranquil, unchanging rhythm of the Indian village lay the secret of the wisdom of Indian civilization.

However, it should be noted that the enthusiastic reception accorded to the Indian village by these romantic paternalists was not shared by one and all. That is how the village was caught in the larger political battles of the day between 'conservatives' and 'radicals'. Administrators like Stephen and Strachey distrusted the sentimental attachment of the paternalists to the Indian village. For them, the truths of political economy had to triumph over nativistic sentiments, and that only in a system of free exchange and completely free individual property rights could the prosperity of the people be fully secured. Naturally, this meant stringent application of utilitarian doctrines to India irrespective of its effects on the village community.

Thus, a series of policy initiatives and the attendant ideological correlates went into the making of the Indian 'village republic' in the broader framework of the British colonial enterprise. With the consequent desire to dampen the pace of social change, more so after the Mutiny, the village community served the imperial need to fall back upon an unchanging and unthreatening institution. It came handy in projecting the Raj as a protector of native institutions. The ideological assertion of its enduring permanence fitted well in the colonisers' quest for a secure agrarian order. It could be seen as an ultimate refuge

against those forces of disorder that the Mutiny had unleashed. In other words, the very nature of the British rule necessitated a particular theory of Indian village, so that Indian realities could be fashioned not only to justify the rule but also its moral overtones.<sup>16</sup>

In a way, for the colonial scholar-administrators the Indian village was the ultimate touchstone to assess the content and direction of social change. If the village community were an approved form of organization, then its conservation had to be the primary duty of the state. Conversely, if it were condemned, then the state had to be called upon to hasten the pace of its dissolution through a *laissez-faire*-induced social revolution. In either case, attitudes to the village community were more the outcomes of the corollaries of attitudes to the great political doctrines of the day than direct responses to its empirical characteristics.<sup>17</sup>

#### VILLAGE AND THE MAKING OF AN AGRARIAN TERRITORY

Reconfiguring the village as a well-circumscribed area amenable to revenue assessment has been the driving force behind the colonial state's mapping of the agrarian territory. Being concerned with various aspects of agricultural organization, the state has understandably wielded its authority to regulate and monitor the territorial units of agricultural organization. As Ludden forcefully asserts, 'organizing agriculture in the circumscribed spaces and legitimating state authority in them have historically been the central concern of the state'.<sup>18</sup>

Admittedly, the state has historically been powerful in relation to the individual village/s. It has continually shaped property rights and revenue demands with respect to land. Though, the basic unit for this relationship has very often not been the village at all. At times, revenue demands would be settled on the basis of smaller estates

within the village. Likewise, many a times, larger estates comprising several villages would be the basis for revenue settlement. Marriott has shown how for the first time the whole countryside was divided into village units for administration with reference to *mahalwari* system of land tenure.<sup>19</sup> In his 'Directions for Revenue Officers' (1844-1848), James Thomson (1804-1853) directed that wherever possible, the whole body of proprietors in each village should be made individually and collectively responsible for paying the land tax. This was a novel requirement, as the previous Mughal policy had often been to recognize estates as units even when they cut across several villages. In the new system, one finds some sort of a disposition to treat each village as if it were a great family. In this sense, the modern ideas of territorial organization of land (based on the unit of revenue village) have unambiguous colonial ancestry.<sup>20</sup> In fact, this was true for the whole of colonial Asia. Thus, in India, as in much of the colonized world, the village became a lynchpin in the overall colonial regulation of agrarian territory. It helped new rulers to settle farming regions in accordance with their conceptualizations of landed property and polices of revenue collection.

By 1815, the colonial rulers had settled upon the village as the basic unit of agrarian administration. While erasing the traces of the previous forms of territorial organization, the British rule enshrined the village community as the core economic, political, and social unit. This projection of the village as the elemental unit of Indian socio-economic organization sub-served several functions. In ideological terms, the village came to represent a survival of agrarian tradition and the administrative foundation of agrarian modernity. . . . The territory called 'India' became traditional and the village and family farm became its elemental units. The cultural construct called 'India' came to rest on the idea that one basic cultural

logic did in fact organize agriculture in all its constituent (village) territories from ancient to modern times.<sup>21</sup>

As the village was being made the basis of a new type of territorial organization, it came to be regarded as the repository of 'authentic' tradition and culture. Stable, traditional village societies got embedded in the territorial expanse of an ancient agrarian civilization surviving all sorts of historical odds. In a way, it was an archetypal 'invention of tradition' where modernity invented traditions of civilization in its own image.<sup>22</sup> According to Ludden, 'the modern invention of civilisation territories continues a very old elite project of using narration to organise agrarian territories'.<sup>23</sup> By projecting the map of British India back into history of ancient times, the British sought to legitimate its authority over all the villages in this agrarian territory. Also, this projection helped achieve a continuity of discourse where the village represents a constant unit of agrarian order from ancient times to the present. To quote Ludden, 'village becomes that part of agrarian space which can be effectively bounded physically and culturally and marked as a spatial domain for organized state power and activity'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, under the colonial dispensation, the *revenue village* became the elemental unit of indigenous agrarian order.

This attempt to create a new type of unified agrarian territory around the idea of the village was bound to dislodge earlier conceptualizations of the village. As the British went about mapping and surveying every inch of the agrarian territory, and organize it in terms of the cellular units of the village, they inflicted enormous violence on those conceptualizations that considered villages as locales of social power outside the state. Even today there is a persistent discrepancy between what the *state calls* 'the village' and what the *villagers think* is 'the village'.

The pre-eminence of the state has

certainly resulted in the gradual loss of the defining characteristics of the village as a social universe. In an interesting study of a village in Tamil Nadu, Daniel demonstrates how the statist definition of the village has marginalized the villager's notion of the village. Contrasting *Ur* and *Kiramam*, he shows how Tamil villagers conceptualize the former as distinct from the latter.<sup>25</sup> A *Kiramam* refers to the revenue village, and thus, to a political unit created for the purpose of taxation and the organization of local government. Administratively, it is under the jurisdiction of the taluk, which is governed by the district, then by the state, and ultimately by the national government. There is no ambiguity about its boundaries, as *Kiramam* refers to the bounded, standard, and universally accepted spatial unit. The government determines what a *Kiramam* is, and it is the same for everyone. There is no contextual variation in the use of the term *Kiramam* even though it is abstract and distant.

While *Kiramam* is a term whose meaning is really context free, universal, and fixed, *Ur* is a person-centric term that derives its meaning from the contextually shifting spatial orientation of the person. In the words of Daniel, '*Ur* is not so much a discreet entity with fixed co-ordinates as a fluid sign with fluid thresholds'.<sup>26</sup> *Ur* is always in relation to a given person or *jati* that is known to have established a special relationship of substantial compatibilities with that particular *Ur*. In the reckoning of the villagers, *Ur* is culturally more significant as soil substance of an *Ur* mixes with the bodily substance of the human inhabitants of that *Ur*. In essence, *Ur* is an indigenous concept of territory. Villagers invariably draw the boundaries of the *Ur* with reference to 'ritually vulnerable spots, flow and transit of substance, shrines of the sentinel deities, the points at which roads or the village streams enter the village, the haunted tamarind tree at the edge'. In fact, 'the villager's concern is

not only with what substances enter the *Ur* and affect its inhabitants but with the effect of these alien substances on the substance of the *Ur* itself'.<sup>27</sup> Despite the fact that *Ur* and *Kiramam* are neither semantically isomorphic nor mutually substitutable, villagers misleadingly represent *Ur* as *Kiramam* in their routine practices. Irrespective of whether this isomorphism between *Ur* and *Kiramam* is apparent or real, it becomes evident that, in terms of scope and political significance, *Kiramam* has been overshadowing *Ur*.

Arguably, the village *per se* was not universally the key unit in terms of local political and power structures. In olden days, powerful notables determined where one revenue village ended and another began. The state did not have so direct a say in deciding the land rights. Until the 1870s, many struggles for the control of land occurred outside the purview of the state. In few cases, land rights were granted as part of remuneration of the state functionaries. There was a curious amalgam of land rights and official status. People with rights to land exercised various types and degrees of power over the local territory and its inhabitants. In other words, the boundaries among local politics, society, law, police and administration remained fuzzy, as land rights were the chief levers of power. In a restricted sense, those who controlled land also controlled much of civic and judicial administration. But then, as Heesterman notes, 'neither the vogue of the village, or the caste, seems to derive from any real Indian arrangement, but rather from the needs of the modern bureaucratic state as it was introduced at the beginning of the last [nineteenth] century'.<sup>28</sup>

The colonial rule created a distance between state and society. Personal proximity to the ruled was unthinkable under the British rule, as it was based on supposedly universal principles of governance. Naturally, the pragmatics of governance required the making of

an official view for the purpose of dealing with society from a distance. This official view, as a rule, had to be an exhaustive grid of narrowly defined categories covering the whole of society and enabling the state to apply its impersonal rules and regulations rationally.<sup>29</sup>

The manufacturing of an official view involved two things. In the first place, the whole of the territory had to be uniformly mapped out in discreet entities. These neatly separating official units obviously could not take cognizance of the multidimensional and widely stretched out networks and interests. The latter were part of the strongly personal and particularistic nature of the old regime, where the overlapping and shifting networks of various right holders and domains used to be the norm. Against the cacophony of the old regime, the British set apart the public domain of the state and society. Here, the concept of the village as an autonomous unit came into its own; it marvelously filled and legitimized the colonial need for a well-defined basic unit. The village made Indian territory intelligible and manageable to the colonial rulers in terms of categories which the latter preferred to employ, and which had historically made sense to them in the light of their own experiences as members of the English society. What caste did in relation to Indian people the village did in relation to Indian territory: made land and people intelligible for categorization and counting. Thus, 'making village knowable was part of the enterprise of making it governable'.<sup>30</sup>

Viewed thus, the creation of 'revenue villages' was part of the making of modern institutions that delimited precisely the content of property rights in British India. The modern making of the village, however, took a long time. It set into motion processes that signalled a definitive shift in power relations between localities and the imperial state. That is, the emergence of the village as

the key unit of administration not only organized agrarian territories and farming regions, but also altered local power relations throughout India in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

Under the colonial dispensation, the definition and delimitation of localities were no longer the handiwork of powerful families and caste groups. They assumed an official institutional form. Even when village communities were organized around socially dominant landed families, they became part of the administrative jurisdiction of urban centres that housed government offices. The then-prevailing theories of culture and modernization fuelled the distinctive shaping of the Indian village and tried to naturalize it as an essential component of the new agrarian social order. The newly configured village was considered to be fit enough for modernization. The market economy and state policies were to liberate its progressive potential by dismantling old bottlenecks arising out of ambiguities and confusion about land rights, prohibitive social controls, and the dominance of caste, sect, and other forms of cultural collectivity.

There is another angle as well. The shaping of the village suited the supposed theoretical opposition between 'Europe's competitive, individualist rationalism and Asia's collective, traditional, peasant community consciousness'.<sup>32</sup> This theoretical dualism has always highlighted the co-operative and harmonious aspects of the ontology of village while underplaying its internal diversity and conflict. In the colonialist reading, village communities formed solid collective identities with closed unitary moral economies. Dewey makes a related argument when he says that more directly dictated by the administrative convenience was the need to reduce social reality to a bi-polar constellation: state and village. There was an attempt to give content to the dictum 'the princes at court, the peasants in the village', so that an

authentic original situation is restored.<sup>33</sup>

#### INDIAN VILLAGE AND THE COLONIAL TYPOLOGY OF CIVILIZATIONS

In the charged nineteenth century theoretical debates, village came to be seen as more than a historical relic; it was, indeed, imbued with much contemporary relevance. For the Westerners, village stood for a world that they had lost. Since it was a world almost lost, depending on one's ideological predilections, it could be embedded in one's version of 'progress' or 'degeneration' in relation to the present. For romantics, idyllic village communities of the past realized those qualities of life that they highly valued and craved for, and which could indeed be realized in some future utopia. Those who were on the side of progress—and there were many—set out to debunk the idyllic image of the village by associating it with economic inequality, a rigidly stratified and stagnant society and its historic subordination to arbitrary powers.

As history and progress were unremitting preoccupations of the nineteenth century Victorian mind, the conceptualization of village in this framework was itself only an instance of a larger problematic predicated upon the (lack of) commitment to progress. Village became a pretext to establish the civilizational stage to which India's extant conditions corresponded. An evolutionist reading of the Indian village suited the British in constructing such a civilizational hierarchy. In fact, the study of the Indian village cannot be seen in isolation of this primary and explicit obsession of the British mind. From the perspective of the Victorian social thought, India was an abstraction, 'variously represented through social structure, religion, mythology, and the pervasive influence of unreason, all embodied and represented in its history'. Not only its singularity and distinctiveness were simply played

down but they were also related to a vision of universal history that is itself 'tethered to an eschatology of progress'. India in general, and the Indian village in particular, had only a provisional status in this grand universal schema of history that the colonialists constructed. Whatever value Indian institutions had was only with reference to illumining the said scheme of progress and civilizational typology.<sup>34</sup>

Expectedly, the construction of a history for India became the major interpretative strategy of the British. It was through her history that India was to become known to the Europeans in the colonial times. Europeans no longer saw India as merely an exotic and bizarre land but as a kind of living museum of the European past. More importantly, such thinking established an enduring structural relationship between India and the West. Notwithstanding the variations in the content of the literature produced on India during the colonial era, one message comes out strikingly: Europe is progressive and changing, whereas India is static and stagnant. It was this crude dualism that enabled the colonialists to look at India as a kind of living fossil bed of the European past. And where else to look for this past but in the living Indian village?<sup>35</sup>

It has been argued that the colonial rulers tried to legitimize their presence in India by designating the village community as the basis of colonial policy. That is, the colonial construction of village was embedded in the principle of territoriality which formed the basis of colonial organization of power. By making village all-important, they could frequently claim to restore a pristine institution that had fallen from grace by the tyranny of the native despotic rulers. This also imparts to the British the credit for having brought to the fore a tradition that was unknown to Indians themselves. In this sense, colonialism as a form of knowledge has shaped much of the modern history of colonized places

and peoples. It went to amass knowledge to enable itself 'to classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled'.<sup>36</sup>

Inden gives an ideological explanation for the new preoccupation with the village as the basic formation of Indian society. He argues that the Orientalist perspective that gained currency during the nineteenth century placed European modernity in a hierarchical relationship with Asiatic tradition.<sup>37</sup> Seen thus,

The constitution of India as a land of villages was also due to the efforts of the British to deconstitute the Indian state. As they were composing their discourses on India's villages, they were displacing a complex polity with an 'ancient' India that they could appropriate as an external appendage of a 'modern' Britain. The essence of the ancient was the division of societies into self-contained, inwardly turned communities consisting of co-operative communal agents. The essence of the modern was the unification of societies consisting of outwardly turned, competitive individuals. Just as the modern succeeded the ancient in time, so the modern would dominate the ancient in space.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, India constituted a vast field on which the British could impose their own version of history. And in their versions, India was a land of oriental despotism, and it has been historically steeped in decay, degeneration and chaos. Nonetheless, there were enduring and unchanging institutions, such as village community, in India at the local level. This fitted well with their notion of unilinear history clearly organized into developmental stages. Thus, India's unchanging institutions based on family, caste and the village communities were construed as empirical indicators of the presence or absence of progress. In other words, Indian village was seen in the light of general concerns animating Western historiography. Certain universal features constructed as markers of progress (the presence of private property in land, for instance)

were vainly looked for in the historic constitution of the village. It was this empirical quest for the markers of progress or (the lack thereof) which made India and Europe appear as braided concerns, and which, in turn, also signals the entry of Indian village into the domain of European social theory.

#### COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE STATE-VILLAGE DUALITY

Dirks argues that colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it. In certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. In this view, colonialism was, nay, primarily, a cultural project of control.<sup>39</sup> For him, the historical anthropology of the colonial state must not be separated from the historical anthropology of the modern nation-state in general, as there was a range of institutional contexts in which colonial knowledge and colonial power were implicated. Indeed, what Dirks calls 'the epistemological violence of the British rule' has left its imprint in ample measure on the categories of contemporary thinking.

Effectively speaking, colonial construction of the village operated along three axes. First, it created a polarity between the ancient and the modern. The essence of ancient India was the division of society into self-contained, inward-looking communities consisting of co-operative communal villagers. Whereas the village was a pre-eminent institution in the ancient times, the state had a nominal presence. When the state was more than a nominal presence, it was rapacious, brutal and arbitrary in relation to the village. Very often, the Indian village was presented as opposed to the Indian state in its essence.

Second, the village was placed in relation to the modern colonial state. Not only was the Indian village opposed to the indigenous forms of state, but also

was the *other* of the modern colonial state being shaped in India. At the very same time the village was being brought into relation with the colonial state, it was also primordialized through a 'denial of co-evalness'. This was a spectacular instance of temporal distancing whereby a hierarchy of societies along a scale of modernity was constructed.<sup>40</sup>

Lastly, the Indian village was placed in relation to a unitary developmental history. In the colonial construction, village had performed a number of survival functions for Indians by insulating itself from the tumultuous ebb and flow of Indian history. In the process, it had stagnated at a low level of political and technological development. Clearly, there was an urgent need to draw the village into the general spirit of the day, that is, development. And, since the colonial state was based on the accumulated wisdom of science and rationality, so the Utilitarians thought, it was the agency to 'develop' the village and restore to it its lost glory that the Romantics had always celebrated.<sup>41</sup>

What comes out strikingly from the colonial accounts is an overdose of generalization on the basis of limited empirical experience. Very often, villages found in one area, or amidst one particular community, were made to represent as the Indian village (for example, Metcalf raised the Jat villages of the region of Delhi to be the embodiment of the Indian village). Viewed thus, idealization of the village necessarily entailed its reification. For the colonialists, village was not merely a crucial institution by virtue of its being the bedrock of land systems or land revenue administration, but was also associated with a characteristic approach to knowledge about Indian society. Underlining the epistemological and political significance of the village, Smith goes to the extent of saying that 'government intervention in village affairs was clearly more basic a condition of British rule than the

periodic enumeration and classification of its subjects'.<sup>42</sup>

In the stereotyped colonial village, time stood still. In no uncertain terms, this yearning for the past, and the consequent desire to keep the past alive in India, was reflective of a certain disenchantment with the Victorian British civilization itself. The ideal of the village community in particular resonated well with nostalgia for 'the world we have lost'. In other words, the stereotyped village served the needs of the British Empire, Western social theory as well as the English nostalgia for a romantic past.

In effect, the conception of a village community, though subject to some shifts in emphasis, cannot be dislodged from its place in the relations between the West and India, both in practical (i.e., political) and theoretical terms.<sup>43</sup> It also betrays a particular European disposition towards the idea of community.<sup>44</sup> In the Indian context, the then reigning Orientalist discourse saw community as something, which the East had retained, but the West had lost. Community was seen as a foundational category in the East, and a theoretical opposition between community and individual, or community and modern society was central to discourses on modern society that developed in Europe and which had a discernible impact on the way Indian village was conceptualized by European scholar-administrators.<sup>45</sup> Positing community as the hallmark of traditional society relegated the Indian village to the realm of an unchanging East that stood in sharp contrast to the individualism of modern society.

#### CONCLUSION

Thanks to the colonial construction of the 'immemorial' village community, even for Indian nationalists, the village remained a compelling sign of 'traditional' India, which the colonial

rule had sought to sustain for its own purposes. Eventually, Indian nationalists appropriated this idealized village, as they saw in these communities evidence for the antiquity of an indigenous concept of democracy, socialism, and much more that suited their ideological palate. The elements of traditional India constructed by the British had always fitted jarringly with the commitment to the ideals of progress and modernization that the nationalists held. An incipient nation had to muddle its way through, without unsettling the basic elements of 'traditional' India such as the village. This reinforces the argument that, in our times, the state has also become dispenser of socio-political identities. This means that the process of labelling (be it of territorial units or social groups) by the state contains the potential of unleashing new solidarities that the labelling might itself engender.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, to label a given human settlement as a village is rarely just a taxonomic or classificatory exercise. The village becomes much more than a semantic slot or a lexicographic gloss. It gets firmly entrenched in the dynamics of power/knowledge. Unfortunately, the locality (place, territory) as a component of social identity has been a largely neglected field of study in Indian sociology/social anthropology.<sup>47</sup>

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dirks, N.B. (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 75.
2. Cohn, Bernard S. (1987) *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 97.
3. Mathur, Saloni "History and Anthropology in South Asia: Rethinking the Archive", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 29, 2000, p. 101.
4. Smith, Richard Saumarez (1996), *Rule by Records: Land Registration and Village Custom in Early British Punjab*, Delhi: Oxford University Press and "Rule-by-Records and Rule-by-Reports: Comple-



- mentary Aspects of the British Imperial Rule of Law”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.19, no.1, pp.153-76.
5. Some of the scholars assert that the discourse on the Indian village under the colonial rule was not fashioned exclusively in the form of revenue and settlement reports. They point toward the vernacular literature— innumerable short stories, novels and other genres—which contains accounts of the Indian village in all its richness. Sadly, so far professional sociologists or historians have barely tapped this literature on the village, which started pouring from the end of the nineteenth century. For example, Lal Behari Dey’s *Bengal Peasant Life* (1906), a description of his native village in the Burdwan district, is frequently cited. Also, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had composed a tract—*Bangadesher Krishak* (Peasant in Bengal)—around the same time as Maine was constructing his theory of the Indian village (see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 151; Jan Breman, “The Village in Focus”, in Jan Breman *et al.*, eds., *The Village in Asia Revisited*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.63. For the use of vernacular literature for social scientific analysis, see Rajat K. Ray, “The Rural World of Tarashankar Banerjee: Social Divisions and Psychological Crosscurrents”, in Peter Robb, ed., *Rural India: Land, Power and Society Under British Rule*, London: Curzon Press, 1983, pp. 275-311 and Vikash N. Pandey, “Re-presenting Rural: From Definition to Discourse”, *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2003, pp. 32-52.
  6. This has been a noteworthy contribution of the historically inclined social/cultural anthropologists. It should be noted that village community is currently the provenance of the anthropologists so much so that it has aroused vociferous protests over the ‘annexation of Indian anthropology by the village community’ (for example, Louis Dumont and D.F. Pocock, “For a Sociology of India”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. I, 1957, pp. 7-22 and Satish Saberwal, ed., *Beyond the Village*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972. The longevity of the debate over the appropriateness of the village as the unit of sociological analysis shows how firmly it has been placed in sociological/anthropological imagination of India. The dominance of the anthropologists, however, is a recent phenomenon. As Clive Dewey, “Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol.6, no.3, 1972, p.291, observes, ‘prior to the post-war anthropological boom, the village community was the plaything of historians and administrators’. In the West, studies of the village were primarily carried out by historians under the influence of the German historical school. This was so because, except for a handful of survivals, the village community was a purely historical phenomenon there. On the contrary, in India, village being an omnipresent reality was studied initially by revenue officials as part of assessing and collecting land revenue. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the East and the West, the historians and the revenue administrators, literally met so far as the study of village community is concerned. This brief interaction was made possible thanks to the growing popularity of *evolutionism* and the *comparative method*. The convergence of these two ‘insisted on the essential identity of the defunct English village community and the living Indian village, separate in time and space, but co-existent in the same phase of social evolution’). *Ibid.*
  7. Parasher, Aloka (1992), “The Village Given to Us: Intellectual Constructions of the Village Community in Historical Writing”, in Alok Bhalla and Peter J. Bumke, eds., *Images of Rural India in the Twentieth Century*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, pp. 17-42.
  8. Neale, W.C. (1990), *Developing Rural India: Politics, Policies and Programs* New Delhi: Allied Publishers, p. 6
  9. Stokes, Eric (1978), *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.
  10. Stokes, Eric (1959), *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
  11. Bearce, G.D. (1961), *British Attitudes Towards India, 1748-1858*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
  12. ‘Utilitarianism’ was the name given to a set of social and ethical principles formulated by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, and developed subsequently by the latter’s son, John Stuart Mill. For a classic study of utilitarianism. see Stokes, n.10, and for its recent treatment, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: India in British Liberal Thought*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18, 119.
  14. Dumont, Louis (1970), “The ‘Village Community’ from Munro to Maine”, in Louis Dumont, *Religion/Politics and History in India*, Paris/The Hague: Mouton Publishers, p. 118.
  15. F. W. Ellis, as the Collector of Madras, was intent on settling the revenue on the basis of village rather than individual peasant, and had a running debate with Munro on this issue.
  16. Upadhyaya, Carol (2001), “The Concept of Community in Indian Social Sciences: An Anthropological Perspective”, in Surinder S. Jodhaka, ed., *Community and Identities: Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 32-58.
  17. See Dewey, n.6, pp. 292-94.
  18. Ludden, David (ed.), (1999), *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, The New Cambridge History of India: IV.4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 34.
  19. Marriott, McKim (1955), “Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation”, in McKim Marriott (ed.), *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 184.
  20. See also Jan Breman, *The Shattered Image: Construction and Deconstruction of the Village in Colonial Asia*, Amsterdam: Comparative Asian Studies, 1987.
  21. Ludden, n.18, p.34.
  22. Hobsbawm, Eric J. and Terence Ranger (eds.), (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
  23. Ludden, n. 18, p. 173.
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. Daniel, Valentine E. (1984), *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 61-104.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 79
  28. Heesterman (1985), p. 181.
  29. *Ibid.*
  30. Smith, n. 4, p. 156.
  31. See Ludden, n.18, pp. 173-74.
  32. *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 222.
  33. Dewey, n. 6.
  34. Mehta, n. 12, p. 111.
  35. See also Cohn, n. 2, pp. 78-79.
  36. Cohn, Bernard S. (1997), *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 5.
  37. Inden, n. 5.
  38. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
  39. Dirks in his foreword to Cohn (1997), pp. ix-xii.
  40. Fabian, Johannes (1983), *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

41. Constable, Philip (2000), "'Imagining' and 'Developing India', H.H. Mann and B.S. Rowntree: Wealth, Subsistence and Poverty in Rural Western India 1907-27", *South Asia*, vol. 23, no.1, pp. 1-37.
42. Smith, n. 4, p. 2.
43. Niranjana, Seemanthini (1991), "Conceptualising the Indian Village: An Overview of the Indian Village Studies Tradition", *Indian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 371-85.
44. For a detailed treatment of *community* as a unit idea of sociology, see Nisbet, Robert A. 1970, *The Sociological Tradition*, London: Heinemann.
45. See Upadhyaya, n. 16, p. 35.
46. See Wood, Geof (1985), 'The Politics of Development Policy Labelling', *Development and Change*, 16 (3), pp. 347-73.
47. See Lambert, Helen (2002), 'Caste, Gender and Locality in Rural Rajasthan', in Vandana Madan. (ed.), *The Village in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 144-60.
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## The Neurobiological Paradigm of Consciousness

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Kuhn in his defining moment of 'revolutionary science' simultaneously defined and deconstructed the notion of paradigm in Philosophy of Science. Existing paradigms are always under determined by new methods and new facts such that tradition shattering complements determine the attitude to scientific inquiry. Neurobiological explanations (NBE) of human consciousness throw up quite a few disparate facts like activated processing of neural masses that do not have to either supervene on syntactic or corresponding external content from the world. NBE, therefore, marks a shift from a synthesized and integrated nativism to an activation based multiple processing of accessible internal states. But such a shift is not without its casualties: computational neuro-biological models of Churchland, Dennett and Searle are either reconstructed to fit into the self-organizing autonomous agency of the mind, or they are abandoned along with many a philosophical parallelism drawn between biological systems and the conscious processes.

The so called cerebral celebrities like the globally available physical state N and the hard problem-binding problem duet are now exchanged with a partially ordered matrix of non-conscious judgments that depends on propagation of a dynamic neural loop. Such a partial ordering opens up a new neurobiological paradigm of 'radical interpretation' of the feedback loop created out of activation and transition. This offers a different choice of 'parameters' that plays the natural game of conscious decisions differently, by way of introducing continuous and graded levels of activity. In the words of Stuart Kauffman of *Investigations*, 'Being autonomous agents, cells must, as individuals living in communities, make the maximum number of reliable discriminations possible and act on them reliably, without "trembling hands".'<sup>1</sup>

If neural descriptions of conscious phenomena achieves what Kauffman called 'expanding the adjacent possible', that is, a transitivity of the form, the representation of a content in

a neural mass N is sufficient to represent that content in the Conscious neighbourhood of the agent. Such a transitivity marks a Turing type computation of internal states of an organism that works in a dynamic manner in order to evolve a semantic content that not only establishes a context dependent relationship with physical constituents of the system, but it also assumes an epistemic 'view from within' kind of function. Such a function is dynamically incoherent at the level of physical constituents, while it attains an epistemic regularity and success at the level of self-organization. Dynamic incoherence at the level of the causal affect of the world is the determinant of context dependent self-organization that contingently orders the internal states of the biological system. Kauffman's methodology of 'Boolean networks' that is self-consistently self-organizing along a classical limit portrays co-evolving networks in a fitness landscape. These networks assume the form of 'information carriers' that could be decoupled from a particular dynamic agency. Further, it is possible