

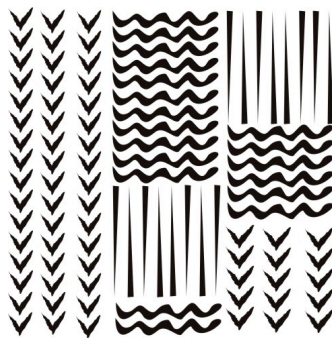
DRAFT PAPER

NOTES ON VILLAGE STUDIES
FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

John Harriss *Simon Fraser University*

STUDYING VILLAGE ECONOMIES IN INDIA
A COLLOQUIUM ON METHODOLOGY

December 21 to 24, 2008



NOTES ON VILLAGE STUDIES FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

John Harriss

Simon Fraser University

The following are preliminary notes towards a full paper.

1. Village studies were for long more or less the stock-in-trade of social anthropologists of India. Major early contributions were marked by the two collections, both published in 1955, edited respectively by M N Srinivas, for long the doyen of Indian sociologists (*India's Villages*) and by the Chicago anthropologist McKim Marriott (*Village India*). These books, between them, included village studies by the founding generation of what can be considered to be the modern social anthropology of India – scholars such as Kathleen Gough, F G Bailey and Bernard Cohn as well as the editors themselves. Succeeding generations, too, up to the present – certainly amongst recent PhD students at the London School of Economics -- have cut their teeth on village studies. These include both ‘village studies’ – studies, that is, in which the village itself is in some way the object of study -- and ‘studies in villages’, where the village is the site of research on a particular problem. Here I am mainly concerned with the former, though the two categories that I have distinguished are not so water-tight that I can possibly avoid discussing the second as well, and notably those (relatively few) studies that have been focussed on economic questions.

2. Early ‘studies of villages’ – influenced by the prevailing structural-functionalist paradigm of the social anthropology of the time - sought to analyse the relationships between the different dimensions of social life. They were usually focussed on caste, however – since this was taken to be the central and defining institution of Indian society. A classic study in this vein – probably the best of the genre - is that of Adrian Mayer (*Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and Its Region* – 1960). The book has a brief description of ‘the agricultural cycle’ in a short background section, but the two major sections of the book are entitled ‘Inter-Caste Relations’ and ‘The Constitution of the Caste’. The second of these is mostly about kinship relations. The first has a chapter on ‘Economic Aspects of Caste’ which is concerned especially with the economic

transactions between caste groups in the village – what other anthropologists in this period, though not Mayer, interestingly enough, refer to as ‘the jajmani system’ – and then quite brief discussions of landholding (given by caste groups), labour relations, trade and moneylending. This chapter is followed by one on ‘Caste and Village Leadership’ that deals with the role of the headman, the village committee and the formal institutions of local government, and analyses the role of the Rajputs as the ‘dominant caste’. Again, this term, invented at about this time by M N Srinivas (in 1955, in the Marriott volume), is not one that Mayer himself used. Neither did he discuss the idea of ‘factions’, though he describes divisions amongst the Rajputs which suggest the possible existence of what other anthropologists have referred to by this term. One of the themes of the chapter is that ‘[the village] is going through the transition between a hereditary system of clear-cut village leadership, and an elective pattern of authority in which the hitherto dominant Rajputs will have to compete with people of other castes, often hierarchically inferior to them’ (p127). Thus Mayer was anticipating the theme of the erosion of ‘dominance’ that appeared strongly, many years later, in the work on state politics in India brought together by Frankel and Rao (1989, 1990). The possible implication of these analyses of the economic and political relationships between castes is that ‘the village’ does have an integrity as a unit, depending upon the specific inter-relationships between castes. In his conclusion Mayer notes, indeed, that ‘caste, in this context, defines a village group, based on traditional occupation, commensal regulations, and a particular status and mode of behaviour in the village’ (p270). And the section of the book on ‘Inter-Caste Relations’ concludes with a chapter on ‘The Village as a Unit’ which analyses both structural features and ‘a kind of local patriotism’ that serve to define the village as a social unit – though Mayer finally emphasises the importance of the local regional context and agrees with Marriott that ‘villages cannot be studied as systems on their own’ (p274).

3. The question of ‘the village as a unit’ is of course one that has been the subject of a good deal of debate also amongst historians, who have interrogated the notion of ‘the village republic’ that was advanced by some colonial administrators (Elphinstone, Metcalf, *et al*). In this work there is the interesting argument, put forward by David Washbrook in his analysis of the political economy and governance of the Madras Presidency in the Nineteenth Century (1976), that the actions of the colonial government – for example, through the institution of village headmanship, and the administration of land revenue - actually tended to emphasise the distinctness of village entities by

comparison with earlier social and political organisation. In parts of the Tamil country other territorial units – the *nadu* (analysed by Brenda Beck in her *Peasant Society in Kongu*, 1972) – seem historically to have been of much greater significance than the village.

4. The style of anthropological research of which I have taken Mayer's as an exemplar – work in which, in regard to the village economy there is a focus on so-called 'jajmani' relations, and rather little on agrarian relations; and in regard to politics, on the roles of the dominant caste and of 'village officers', on village factions and village councils (panchayats) – may be seen as having reached a kind of culmination in Louis Dumont's distinctive synthesis in *Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications* (first published in French in 1966 and in English translation for the first time in 1970). This reflected of course, the priorities for 'the sociology of India' that Dumont and his collaborator David Pocock had defined in the first issues of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in the mid 1950s. These were in fact quite resolutely structuralist, and emphasised the centrality of ideas and values. A part of the argument was that the notion of village solidarity is 'largely an artificial creation, and that to the extent that it is real, this reality derives from the relations between dominant and dependent castes. Caste and not the village should be the proper unit of study' (Beteille's summary: 1974, p40). As Beteille went on to note, F G Bailey had responded to Dumont and Pocock in the early 'For a Sociology of India' debate and argued that 'there are many kinds of relations which can be studied independently of caste and for which the village provides an adequate framework' – such, notably, as ownership and control of land and the relations deriving from it (Beteille 1974, p40)

5. Thus it was that not long after the publication of *Homo Hierarchicus*, Andre Beteille should have argued (in an article first published in 1969 entitled 'Ideas and Interests', republished in *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*, 1974), in almost so many words 'Now that we have a sociology of values for India, let us work on a sociology of interests'. Beteille's own project at this time followed from his own village monograph *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (published in 1965). This, whilst offering analysis of caste relations, followed Weber's lead (in the essay 'Class, Status and Party') in arguing that there are different dimensions of power, having to do with class relationships, status differentiation and political mobilisation. While there may be strong interconnections between these different dimensions, and they may even be

more or less coterminous with each other, they are not necessarily so related. In the Tanjore village, Beteille argued, 'caste', 'class' and 'power' had increasingly come to be differentiated from each other, so that – in this case - dominance in regard to class, status and 'party' was no longer concentrated amongst the Brahmins. Following from his village research, Beteille then undertook studies of agrarian relations, in Tanjore District and in West Bengal (where he examined the role of the *jotedars*), and of peasant associations and 'the causes of agrarian unrest' (all published in the 1974 book). Important though his contribution was, it is fair to say, however, that Beteille did not himself undertake any very substantial analysis of agrarian relations, based on village research.

6. In fact, in the same year (1974) as the publication of Beteille's *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*, there appeared Jan Breman's *Patronage and Exploitation* – about the breakdown of the *hali* system of labour relations in south Gujarat - which, if not absolutely the first (that honour perhaps belongs to Ramkrishna Mukherjee), was an outstanding early analysis of rural society and agrarian relations, based on village studies (the two villages Chikhligam and Gandevigam). A little later there appeared ethnographies of agrarian class relations, and of the differentiation of the peasantry, based on village studies, and influenced at least to some extent by the then on-going 'mode of production' debate, in the work of Goran Djurfeldt and Staffan Lindberg (*Behind Poverty: the Social Formation in a Tamil Village*, 1975) and myself (*Capitalism and Peasant Farming* – my PhD thesis was completed in 1977 though the book with this title was published only in 1982). Both these studies more or less explicitly took up Beteille's challenge about developing a 'sociology of interests', and though they bear quite a strong resemblance to the earlier village monographs in that they attempt to encompass analysis of the inter-relations of different dimensions of social life – kinship, religion and ritual, and politics, as well as caste and class in the case of my own book – they have an altogether different focus. Whereas the earlier monographs all focussed on caste relations, these studies are focussed on the relations of agrarian classes (even though, as I have pointed out on a number of occasions these class relations may actually be *experienced* by people through the prism of caste). It is a matter for debate how much these ethnographies contributed that was not established through analysis of macro-data from NSSO and other surveys, but my own claim is that they both developed an analysis of the processes of accumulation (mine emphasised the role of merchant capital and I was fortunate to have worked closely with Barbara Harriss(-White) who researched agricultural trade in the

same region of Tamil Nadu), and provided an account of class formation and the forms of class consciousness – both of which were generally lacking in the macro-studies. One defence of village studies is therefore, that as I once put it, a village is a ‘conjuncture of much wider processes and relationships’ (*Capitalism and Peasant Farming*, p17). Anand Chakravarti has said, commenting on this idea that: ‘The utility of village studies has been questioned on the ground that they fail to take account of macro processes which affect economic and political relations within a given village community. However, to the extent that a village is not regarded as a discrete entity, or a self-contained universe, but is viewed as an arena in which the players participate in – or, indeed, even embody – wider social processes, the analytical significance of village studies transcends the boundaries of the community’ (2001, p22).

7. Later village studies in a similar vein – though not necessarily written by paid-up ‘anthropologists’¹ - include V K Ramachandran’s *Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture* (1990) and Anand Chakravarti’s *Social Power and Everyday Class Relations: Agrarian Transformation in North Bihar* (2001). Both are concerned, in part with questions about unfreedom in agrarian labour relations that have been the subject of vigorous (though not always illuminating) debate, prosecuted in particular as a result of the interventions of Tom Brass. More recently Jan Breman – the main target of Brass’s criticisms - has reflected on half a century of agrarian change in south Gujarat, based on his studies in four villages, including Chikhligam and Gandevigam, in *The Poverty Regime in Village India* (2007). This shows the analytical possibilities of longitudinal village studies conducted by a single ethnographic observer. Amongst other findings Breman argues that ‘the most important progress made at the bottom of the village economy is the Halpati’s demand for respect for their right to live and work in dignity’ (p433). Most recently Vinay Gidwani’s *Capital, interrupted: agrarian development and the politics of work in India* (2008) in part compares Marxist approaches to the analysis of the labour process in agriculture with the approach of the New Institutional Economics. He argues however, criticising the epistemological assumptions of both, that institutional outcomes ‘depend heavily on the cultural realities of actors’ practices’. Specifically he explains changing labour relations in the context of struggles over status between the dominant caste Patels and the subordinate Kolis. His analysis shows up again the value of analysing ideological aspects

¹ Indeed, of the authors I have mentioned Breman, and Djurfeldt and Lindberg, would probably all describe themselves as ‘sociologists’, Ramachandran is of course an economist, and Vinay Gidwani teaches geography.

of class relations, and this is something that is a particular strength of village-based ethnography. The point that I am making here goes rather beyond the arguments expressed in the book *Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists*, edited by Pranab Bardhan (1989). These conversations ranged over arguments, many of them familiar ones, about the strengths and weaknesses of ‘macro’ research, based on survey data, sometimes using econometric techniques, and favoured by many economists, as opposed to ‘micro’ research, drawing on ethnography, favoured (not exclusively so) by anthropologists. One of the main conclusions was the sensible one that there is much to be gained by combining methodologies, but in this case – because the focus was on the measurement and analysis of poverty – particular emphasis was given to the value of ethnographic understanding of people’s own concepts so as to improve the measurements made by economists. The point that I am making here is that the analysis of agrarian production relations, of labour institutions and class formation requires understanding of their cultural and ideological dimensions, and that this kind of analysis is a major strength of village ethnography ².

8. There is another genre of anthropological research on villages that is concerned in some ways with the village as a social and political entity – a distinctive institution, perhaps. One important study here is Robert Wade’s *Village Republics* (1988) which is certainly not a conventional village monograph, though it does draw on extensive village-based ethnography. The book is concerned with local organisation for the management of common pool resources, here irrigation water, and relatedly with access to grazing. The first chapter is entitled ‘The village as a corporate group’, and in it Wade comments on the fact that much of the literature on village India suggests that village-level collective organisation is remarkable for its absence. His book, however, shows that ‘within one small area of the South Indian uplands some villages sustain a public realm of a sophistication which to my knowledge has not previously been reported for Indian caste villages ... In contrast, other villages in the same area show almost no village-based collective action at all...Only a few miles may separate a village with a great deal of

² I am not claiming, of course, that the short list of research studies referred to in this paragraph is in any way comprehensive, but I have referred to a sequence of studies with a focus on agrarian class relations. I did not, for example, include Akhil Gupta’s *Postcolonial Developments*, published in 1998, because though it is based at least in part on a village study, it reflects a different genre of writing, being ‘centrally concerned with the politics of postcolonial identities rather than the green revolution, although the argument crucially hinges on the importance of the latter for questions of identity through a consideration of discourses of development’ (p28).

public organization with one with very little' (p5). Much of the book is concerned with explaining the circumstances that give rise to the whole range, or some sub-set of the village-based corporate institutions – concerned with 'governing the commons' - that Wade found, including farmers' assemblies, village councils (not the statutory panchayats), standing funds, village field guards, and common irrigators. The significance of the book is at least two-fold: one that it shows the value of comparing villages within a relatively small region, but two, that it presents a strong argument for considering villages as 'corporate groups', contra the arguments of Dumont and others.

9. A more recent village study (more accurately, 'pair of comparative village studies') exploring problems and ideas that are comparable with those in Wade's book, is David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (2003). Water, in the south Indian systems of tank irrigation that Mosse has studied, is both subject to 'rule' - rather than being 'managed' - and is in a sense an instrument of rule. There is an implicit reference to the argument expressed in and made familiar by the title of an old paper of Walter Neale's 'Land is to Rule' (in Frykenberg 1967). As Mosse says at one point 'Land and water in Tamil Nadu are not only exploitable resources but also media through which a variety of social relations have been structured' (p.167). In relation to this general argument the core of Mosse's book is a fascinating comparison of two almost adjacent tank villages that are, nonetheless, quite radically contrasted with each other. One village has formal rules of water allocation and distribution and a system for rationing it in times of shortage, administered by village menials known as *nirpaccis* who are all Pallars, and whose servile role is the reciprocal of Maravar dominance. The other village has none of these institutions and an acknowledged *lack* of order or *kattupatu*. Whereas in the first village hierarchy persists and 'power and authority are articulated through public institutions [notably tanks and temples] and their rules" in the second 'power operates through more diffuse private networks of alliance, patronage, and personal obligation, or appeals to the external authority of the state' (p.203). The breakdown of hierarchy here has to do with the contestation of Maravar dominance over the last two centuries by Utaiyars, and with ecological differences from the first village that affect the cropping pattern and make for different demands for water access. But the two villages differ in other respects as well, and in an effort to sort out the significance of different factors, Mosse undertook a survey of 89 tanks in 79 villages within the area of the same tank system. He found a clear pattern: villages on red soils in the upper part of the catchment were generally

characterised by strong collective action (as in the first village that he described and analysed in detail); while in villages on the water retentive black soils in the lower part of the catchment, where tanks have a less critical role to play in the agricultural economy, the institutions of collective action were much weaker. In other words, in a way that is actually very similar to that described by Wade in his analysis of variations in collective action across different villages in the canal irrigation system that he studied in Kurnool, the pattern of collective action is an expression of ecological variation and of its implications for the costs and benefits of cooperation. But for Mosse this is not all there is to it. He argues that the significance of ecological variation is culturally and politically mediated: in short, the villages in the upper catchment are '*kattupatu* villages' and those in the lower catchment are not. Mosse sums up: 'The difference between the two areas is not that self-interested farmers are rationally constrained to follow rules in one local ecology, and not in another. Rather it is that in one set of villages power and authority tend to be articulated through tanks as public institutions (along with the temple, service roles etc) while in the other set power operates through more diffuse private networks of patronage, alliance and personal obligation' (p.234). It is possible that a similar argument also holds in regard to the area analysed by Robert Wade. Certainly there are strong hints in his work that the existence of the local water management institutions that he describes goes along with Reddy dominance, and that where this dominance has been challenged the institutions are much less likely to be found. As can be demonstrated in relation to other phenomena – such as the functioning of labour markets (in Gidwani's work, or my own), or the character of political regimes at state level – the strength of, or the extent of the persistence of hierarchy or traditional 'dominance' exercises particular influence. These are social phenomena that are, in a sense, the preserve in research of village studies.

10. There are other anthropological village studies that treat the village as an important and distinctive arena of politics, going back for instance to the seminal research of F G Bailey on the role of political brokers in the Orissa villages that he studied (e.g Bailey 1963), and continued in Marguerite Robinson's *The Law of the Fishes* (1988), or most recently in research by several scholars on 'the everyday state'. Such research has become of particular significance latterly, in the context of debates about civil society and citizenship, and the nature and functioning of democracy in India. In India, as elsewhere, ethnographic village studies provide a platform, too, for the analysis of what

‘development’, or other action of the state, actually does. A very recent study of this kind, involving village research though not a full ‘village study’, is in Aradhana Sharma’s *Logics of Empowerment* (2008). This is – in part -- about, as Sharma puts it ‘the on-the-ground messiness of who constitutes the government (and) of what the state is and what it is not’, and what particular programmes concerned with women’s empowerment actually do.

11. Briefly to conclude these observations, for the moment. I have argued that anthropological/ethnographic village studies focussing on agrarian relations, class formation and labour institutions, have particular strengths, especially because of giving attention to their cultural and ideological contexts (after all, ‘class consciousness’ and ‘class formation’ do not just follow automatically from ‘class structure’). A related point, though not one that I have elaborated upon very much here, is that there may be a particular value in the kind of research on economic institutions that village studies make possible, because they open up understanding of the significance of their cultural and political ‘embedding’. The phenomena observed by Bardhan and Rudra (reported in a paper in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1986³) in rural labour markets, for instance, when different forms of labour contracts and different wage rates obtain in even adjacent villages, reinforce the point – and also connect up with the further central point that I have sought to make. This is the argument that though there are certainly many good reasons for being critical of ideas about ‘village republics’ or ‘village community’, villages may sensibly be studied, as Wade and Mosse have shown, as distinctive institutions (‘corporate groups’) with their own public realms and forms of organization, and studied too as distinctive political arenas.

³ In a future development of these notes I will return, also, to Ashok Rudra’s essay on ‘Local Power and Farm Level Decision Making’ and to Ronald Herring’s ‘Economic Consequences of Lower Power Configurations in Rural South Asia’ in M Desai, S H Rudolph and A Rudra (eds) *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia* (1984)