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BOOK REVIEW

The Social Significance of Villages

John Harriss*

Mines, Diane P., and Yazgi, Nicolas (eds.) (2010), *Village Matters: Relocating Villages in the Contemporary Anthropology of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

In a review of the anthropology of South Asia written twenty years ago, Christopher Fuller and Jonathan Spencer noted the demise of the village studies that had been more or less the stock-in-trade of the anthropology of the region until about the end of the 1970s. By that time, they said, for an anthropologist to study a village was generally considered "boring" (Fuller and Spencer 1990, p. 86). At about the same time, another writer, M. F. Patel, cited by Mines and Yazgi (p. xii), described villages in India as having become "passe". And much more recently, Dipankar Gupta (2005) has written at length about the declining significance of the village as a social entity, posing the question, at one point, as to whether there is not a sense in which it is "vanishing". Gupta draws attention to the implications of economic changes, including the decline of agriculture, that have seen more and more people trying to leave villages in search of employment, and – relatedly – the decline of caste hierarchies. As another writer has argued in similar vein:

> The importance of land as a factor of livelihood and dominance is decreasing and other factors of production are becoming more important…more and more people are losing interest in village affairs. The urge to dominate over the lower castes always had a political-economic angle, and once the locus of the economy has partially shifted away from the village, the tendency to dominate is beginning to wither away (Singh 2005, p. 3173).

Such arguments resonate with my own more recent experience of rural Tamil Nadu, where it has been usual to find large numbers of village houses locked up through the day (and some of them for much longer periods) – something I would have found strange in the 1970s. In these circumstances, when they seem to be less and less the arenas of Indians' lives, why study villages at all? As one of the contributors to this book, Ronald Inden, argues, from his study of cinema over the last several decades, "shantytowns have displaced villages in the national imaginary" (p. 252). Shouldn't they also, perhaps, have displaced villages as a focus of social science research?

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The aim of the editors of this book, and of the authors whose work they have brought together (originally in a conference panel in 2004) is to counter such views. A foundational argument of the book as a whole is that, in Lee Schlesinger's words in his chapter, "Village lands and village life, while bounded, are not self-contained, much less self-sufficient or autonomous." Still, the editors say,

> We aim to show how at the beginning of the twenty-first century, villages constitute not only viable research objects, but indeed also one of the important conceptual frames and sites for understanding social, historical, personal and political life in India (p. 13).

One wonders if their omission here of specific reference to economic life, is deliberate. All but one of the contributors to the book are anthropologists, and the book as a whole – as the sub-title suggests – is directed at their fellow anthropologists. The editors trace the history of anthropological village studies in India, and one of the contributors, Octave Debary, that of village studies in French anthropology, linking these histories to theoretical developments in their discipline. As the discipline shifted emphatically away from the structural-functionalist paradigm that underlay most of the studies that were completed in the 1950s and 1960s, village studies were pushed to the margins in the anthropology of India. Subsequently, in the words of another contributor, Saurabh Dube,

> Elaborations of practice, process and power – often projected as the novel, cutting-edge analytical trinity of critical anthropology [opposing what was seen as the static character of functionalist anthropology: JH] – and emphases on transnational procedures, intersecting cultures, and overlapping histories have all meant that the village has not fared too well here…(p. 40).

The editors and contributors make a clear distinction between what they describe as "studies *in* villages," which have never ceased to be significant in the anthropology of India – and which I am sure they would consider to be the character of much research in agrarian studies – and "studies *of* villages". Their focus is on the latter. As the editors say

> the chapters gathered here take villages seriously as ontological existents, key aspects of experience, reservoirs for discourse or projections, units for collective action, elements of consciousness of self or otherness, as well as objects to be interpretively constructed, based on empirical ethnographic work (p. 13).

They are concerned essentially with the meanings of villages in people's lives – hence, perhaps, their inclusion of two chapters on representations of "the village" in Indian cinema.

What Mines and Yazgi are referring to is something that will be familiar to all those who have lived and worked, or have done substantial research in villages – the ways in which different villages have distinct identities or characters that matter to people. I myself, for example, have lived for many years in a village in Oxfordshire in England. I am not a native of the village, but I identify strongly with it. "My" village

is thought of by many of us who live there as a "good village," one with a strong sense of community, reflected in part in the density of our village associations. We contrast our village with its closest neighbour, which we don't think has anything like the strong sense of community that we have. After all, it has no village associations. Some of us are aware of a history that says that our village was on one side in the English civil war of the 17th century, while the next village was on the other. And I am aware of exactly comparable sentiments in "my" village in Tamil Nadu. There the village is directly adjacent to another, so that from the air the settlement as a whole must look like one place. Yet the two villages are associated with different territories and in the 1970s they had different panchayats. We in our village thought of ourselves as living in a place with a strong sense of unity and order, whereas we decried the "rowdies" and the "crooks" who we thought lived in the place next door. Localities (or, more accurately, people's mental constructions of locality, their ideas about "place") are indeed an important aspect of human identities; and research studies do of course show that villages may differ a lot in such ways as the extent to which they support collective action (as Robert Wade, for instance, showed in regard to the management of irrigation in a part of Andhra Pradesh: Wade 1988).

In various ways the eight ethnographic chapters in the book (this excludes a "Preamble" by Saurabh Dube, chapters by Inden and by Madhava Prasad on representations of villages in film, and two chapters on "comparative epistemologies," the one by Debray on rural studies in French anthropology, and one by Deborah Durham on African studies), all explore people's ideas about village places. Nicolas Yazgi, in his own chapter, offers a vivid analysis of local elections in a small region of Uttarakhand, showing how they are influenced by concerns about village "unity" that may, for example, cancel out party loyalties. "Unity," too, constitutes an instrumental resource that is worked for (as I find that it is in my Oxfordshire village) rather than being "a feature of timeless tradition…or…a partial anthropological fiction linked to (neo) functionalist agendas" (p. 81) – or, one might add, rather than being an essential property of local communities in the way that is presumed in popular ideas in the development discourse about the potentials of local organisation and "participation". The elections Yazgi describes

> amount neither to the mechanical implementation of top-down government procedures, nor to a simple transposition of the power relations specific to a cluster of villages, but to an imbricated process that results in emergent and unpredictable properties to shape both village collectivities and regional government bodies (p. 79).

William Sax, in the next chapter, also draws on fieldwork in Uttarakhand to develop an argument about the senses in which villages can be seen as having "agency" in the context of the social organisation of the "very little kingdoms" of the particular region of his research. Ann Grodzins Gold's illuminating study of sacred groves in Rajasthan is only rather tangentially about villages, though she shows how these groves may be "foundational to local identities and collectivities" (p. 117), and in at least one case an object for collective action on the parts of village

people. Bettina Weiz then tells the story of a Paraiyar (Dalit) common irrigator in a Tamil village, and of how, through this role in the management of water he helps "to constitute the village as a whole" (p. 154). The following chapter, by Ishita Banerjee-Dube, is about the significance of villages as sites in the spread of a particular radical religious sect in Orissa, and as sites of memory. In this account "the village" constitutes "a constant point of reference in configurations of identity and community (and) it also simultaneously draws and transcends the contours of a bonded group" (p. 169).

Peter Gottschalk, in what for me is the most compelling contribution to the book as a whole, discusses a group of villages in a part of Bihar, as "spaces of rural Hindu-Muslim interactions". The chapter begins with the story of a man who has led an RSS *shakha*, but who also always participates in his family's prayers at a Sufi tomb. Later we read of the leading families of two villages, said to be descended from two brothers, but one of them Muslim and the other Rajput, and of other deep attachments between Muslims and Hindus, including even some who are members of the RSS. Gottschalk shows, therefore, how relationships between Hindus and Muslims that are specific to particular places cut right across the rigidly defined categories of Hindutva ideology. These are eroded "under the daily engagement with the complex array of categories in the Chainpur area" (p. 194).

Finally, both Lee Schlesinger – writing in part about the language of coming and going of Maharashtrian villagers - and Valentine Daniel, with regard to Tamils from Sri Lanka, offer, in different ways, poignant analyses of the significance of "their" villages in people's lives.

Clearly, this very short account of the content of eight rather diverse papers does not do justice to the richness of the ethnography that appears in some of them, or to all the ideas that are expressed by their authors. There is, however, no consistent theme running through them all, beyond what the editors summarise as the "sense that the village is not just a territory, but a 'structure of feeling,' an embodied reality that actors carry forth into the worlds in which they act" (p. 11). In this way the volume as a whole certainly meets the first of the two aims that the editors have for it, that of "readdress(ing) village studies in order to question the delegitimization of villages as objects of anthropological concern." I am less convinced of their success in proposing "some new topical research," not least because "the village" is somewhat tangential to the main arguments in other chapters, as well as in Gold's.

The volume will probably not be found of more than marginal interest by most scholars in agrarian studies. For them, there may be more interest in continuation of the work of those economists who have also taken "the village" seriously as an object of study. An example is the work of the late Ashok Rudra on the ways in which markets are fragmented by village differences (as, for example, in his contribution to Desai, Rudolph and Rudra 1984). Another is the work of Robert Wade on village

institutions. The work of both Rudra and Wade points to the value, too, of studying clusters of villages and their relations – which has not been done all that often.

In sum, *Village Matters* makes a positive contribution in reasserting – *contra* Dipankar Gupta, for instance – the social significance of villages, but it speaks rather little to the concerns of agrarian studies.

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