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The Rural is on the Decline. The Village Still Matters

By: Jaideep Hardikar

The rural and the urban have been seen as separate; one backward, the other a symbol of progress. Yet their fates are intimately linked.

India lives in her villages, Mahatma Gandhi would typically say. This notion continues to hold a sway over our thinking even today about the countryside, like a persisting nostalgia.

But what exactly is the Indian village? How does one place the Indian village society in the 21st century? Is it a romantic notion of the past as held by the traditionalists, or a decaying body of the present that we hear in economic debates? Is it but a static body, out of sync with global transformations that sweep the cosmopolitan urban life?

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Whether in government policy documents or in civil society approaches, commentaries on the village and changes in the countryside have taken the binary of rural versus urban as a foregone conclusion. This binary glosses over the heterogeneity of the village society, of caste, class, and gender.

The problem deepens when governments ignore the complex socio-economic, cultural and political realities to assume that backwardness can be resolved through a magical developmental breakthrough. Even civil society organisations either presuppose the village, as a site of deficit or poverty and obsolete traditions, that needs to be catapulted to modernity; or ride on romantic notions of the village as an epitome of a harmonious structural functionality. It is either black or white, never the grey.

The ‘commonsensical’ village

Surinder Singh Jodhka’s illuminating new book, *The Indian Village: Rural Lives in the 21st Century*, is not a retelling of what we already know, but what we have been missing. Written for a non-academic reader, the book makes a case to revisualise the way we contextualise post-Independence village society. It stands out as an inquiry into the evolution of the rural as well as the frameworks through which we look at the idea of ‘the village’.

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The roots of the worldview about the backward village lie in the concept of development, a powerful and hegemonic idea from when global politics was reconfigured following World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. The negative invocation of ‘the village’ became particularly frequent in post-war framings of rural lives in global South, driven by anxieties in the West about the spread of communism in Asia. This developmentalist approach pervaded the mindset of the Indian elite, who did not hesitate in accepting the notion that villages indeed were sites of chronic hunger and poverty.

Jodhka shows how the “Indian common sense” about village society emerged from the interplay between the differing and often confrontationist views around the village among the most towering of the Indian statesmen, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru. All three began with the same construct: the village essentially as a Hindu village, composed of caste groupings and marked by differences and inequalities. Where they diverged was when “Nehru foregrounded the realities of class, Ambedkar pointed to the divisions of caste. Gandhi recognised the presence of both caste as well as class.”

Ambedkar’s differences were more fundamental: he had no sympathy for village life. He saw the so-called spirit of village community as antithetical to democracy.

Ambedkar and Gandhi disagreed on the value of village community. "While Gandhi acknowledged that these differences and inequalities were undesirable, he firmly believed that the collective spirit of the traditional community had the potential of overcoming them." Ambedkar had no such sympathy for village life. He saw the so-called spirit of village community as antithetical to democracy, given that there was (and is) no place for Dalits to live in the village with dignity.

State policy in the post-Independence period foregrounded the village as a site and source of many of the country's problems, which ought to be solved through centralised planning. Community development – at the time almost an obsession of programmatic thinking in development circles – too emerged from the same binary of the urban as an emblem of progress and the rural as a site of backwardness. By implication, the modern man lived in the city and rural masses were relics of the past.

A flawed binary

Jodhka argues that the 'rural' and 'urban' are not sui generis categories, as if they represent two stages in the life of a biological organism.

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A rural-urban distinction is difficult to sustain in a rapidly globalising world, where telecommunication and mass media have nearly erased the old differences between the city and the countryside. The flow of information of all hues is faster and cultures of all kinds have diffused into rural areas. Jodhka refers to the protestors from rural Punjab and Haryana during the year-long struggle in New Delhi against [three contentious farm laws](#) that were introduced by the Modi-government at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which had to be withdrawn in 2021 in the face of stiff resistance by the farmers. "What was clearly evident from the political acumen and strategies of struggle [...] was that] the farmers sitting on the borders of Delhi were not simple-minded rustic peasants, as their stereotypes generally popular among the urban middle classes tend to suggest. They were as cosmopolitan as other globally mobile netizens of twenty-first century India."

One could also see the truth of this insight in the economically backward districts in the northeastern and eastern states, where seasonal and permanent out-migration of rural labour has been quite profuse in the last three decades. This has led to a new trend of an aspirational mismatch. Rural people dream of the materialistic prosperity they see in the upwardly mobile areas of cities they go to work, but are unable to buy that dream with the relatively lower wages they earn.

As Jodhka writes: "'Rural' and 'Urban' are also not simply demographic or economic processes. They are human realities – fluid, inherently diverse, and ever changing. As relational structures, they also need to be seen through the prisms of history, culture, and power, not merely through the reductionist economic or demographic lens that blinds us to the village society's obvious realities."

The return of the rural

To show how agriculture has not been a static activity and that there is no quintessential peasant way of life, Jodhka traces rural transformations, the decline of agriculture, and crises of village life through the seven decades since Independence.

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A swathe of measures – democratisation, land reforms, development policies, and the Green Revolution – reordered rural landscapes. The patterns of change were different in different states, yet common to all was that they unleashed forces that over a period of time, changed rural power relations. Land reforms, even in limited ways, dented the power of dominant landowning classes and steadily expanded the social base of rural power. Those earlier with limited, intermediary rights in land became propertied. Large investments in irrigation systems, which went hand in hand with Green Revolution, created wealth for these newer landowners who catapulted to economic dominance over the traditional rural elite. The rise of these new dominant groups marginalised moneylending castes such as the Banias in northwest India pushing the latter to move out of the villages to towns.

These developments had political consequences for wider society. The new dominant rural groups largely came from middle castes. Their rise put the Other Backward Classes and regional political forces on the centre-stage of Indian politics. On the heels came the

growing mobilisation of erstwhile ‘untouchable’ communities around a pan-India Dalit identity.

In the meanwhile, road and telecommunication networks had steadily integrated rural settlements into national life. Ever-expanding development schemes leading to the expansion of the state into the village and deepened democratisation – crowned by the landmark 73rd amendment to the Constitution in 1993 that institutionalised Panchayati Raj.

Post-liberalisation, India witnessed a steady diversion of the economic focus away from the rural and agriculture to urban areas and the service sector. Agriculture’s contribution to GDP has been [declining](#) for decades. The peasant classes are suffering economically. Despite these socio-economic realities, Jodhka makes the case that rural society endures. The village has not yet given up on itself.

This ‘rural resurgence’ comes out in two powerful images. First, the [abhorrent scenes](#) during the Covid-19 lockdowns, of thousands of rural migrants walking back for days and weeks from cities to the safety of their native villages. The second case is the massive year-long sit-in by farmers on the borders of Delhi during 2020–21 in protest against the three controversial farm laws.

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These images prompt Jodhka to revisit the popular narrative of the decline of agriculture and argue that [the worth of agriculture](#) remains much larger than its shrinking quantifiable value addition to gross national income. Jodhka quotes Barbara Harris-White’s proposition that agriculture “remains a vital sponge for absorbing surplus labour” and provides a critical support for livelihood and sustenance of a very large number of people. The declining share and value of rural economy in the national life did not lead to a complete disappearance of the rural. Even while their numbers declined, farming and rural identities did not go away.

I would argue that some of this persistence is the outcome of the rural masses’ compulsion to be in agriculture in the absence of any major other sector able to absorb them. Many peasant families, given an opportunity, would prefer to do anything but farming. Jodhka’s inquiry – the one that deals with the shifts in power relations and systems – could have reflected upon the current schisms in the countryside. Landed classes and dominant castes exhibit anxiety over their declining economic and social status and demand reservations in education, jobs, and political power.

Jodhka’s book is a must-read for students, scholars and journalists interested in all things rural. It lays new ground for the scholarship on the countryside to build upon, including a necessary and urgent inquiry into the transformations being scripted in the digital age by internet technology, with the residents of village no exception to its sweeping consequences.

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