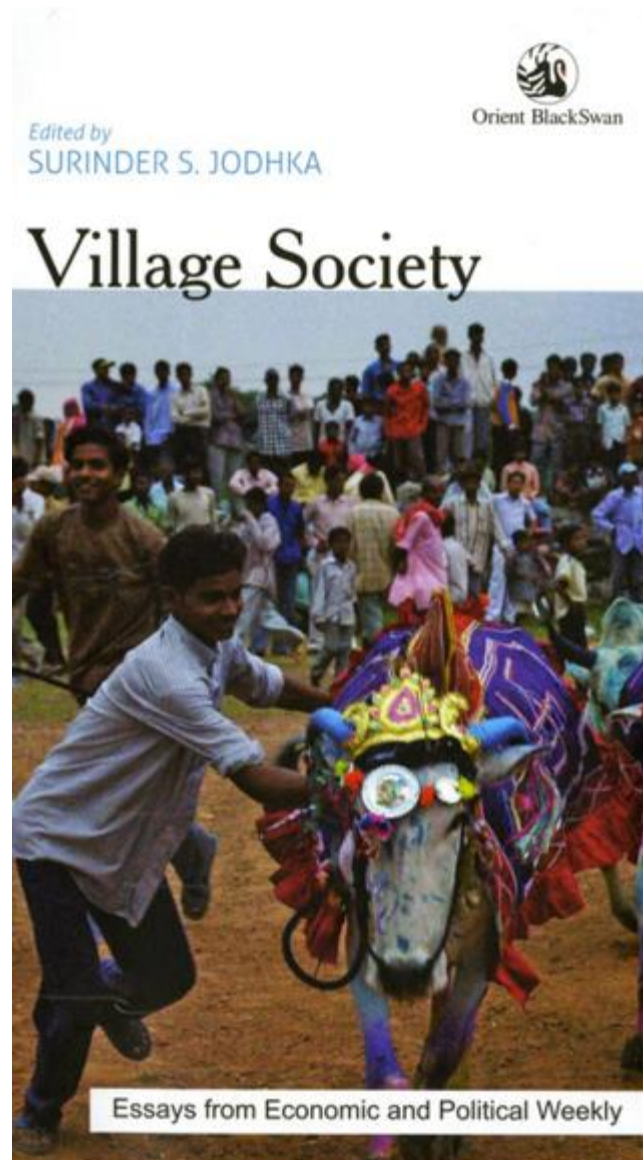


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Life and times of the Indian village

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THE PLOT AGAINST THE NHS: Colin Leys and Stewart Player; Merlin Press, Crane Street Chambers, 6 Crane Street, Pontypool NP4 6ND, Wales. £ 12.95.

A book of critiques of colonial notions of the self-sufficient village community

The heart of this collection of essays is a powerful historiographical introduction to the study of the Indian village by the editor. Explaining how the Indian village became a focal point of study for social anthropologists, the introduction brings together critiques of colonial notions of the self-sufficient village community and idealised models of caste and varna.

It gives a brief history of rural India since independence, with a discussion on land reforms, the green revolution, and current trends of growing migration, non-farm employment and a transformation of rural power structures, including the caste system.

The essays brought together in this book were published in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) over the last 50 years. They are broadly organised under four main headings — methodology, social and cultural life, social, economic and political processes, and long term perspectives on change.

The first section includes essays on ethnographic methodology by the doyens of sociology in India — M.N. Srinivas and Andre Beteille. They reinforce why fieldwork and participant observation are the fundamental tools of the social anthropologist and how they can be crucial in providing insights for understanding society and for better policy making.

The essay by Jodhka analyses the importance of the village in historical imagination through the writings of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. He shows how all three believed the village to form the traditional heart of India but had contrasting approaches towards its rehabilitation.

The second section contains six essays on varied topics. K.L. Sharma's 1970 piece was a challenge to the modernist theories of development prevalent at the time where he argues only upper castes/classes had the resources to "adopt and internalize modernist values".

Although he accepted the dichotomy of modernity and tradition (which itself has been subsequently challenged), he argued for an exceptional form of manifestation of modernity in Indian society, with traditional practices stubbornly continuing and opportunities for modernisation being denied to those without access to adequate resources.

Another article from the late 1990s by Mukul Sharma, examines the political fallout surrounding the assertion of Dalit families in a village in north Bihar, which resulted from the migration of men and the creation of a Sangathan to bargain for their rights. The excerpt presented from G.K. Karanth's 1987 article on the impact of sericulture on jajmani institutions in a Karnataka village gives a thorough description of the latter but not enough about sericulture-related change, given its title. The article by Jishnu Das on Garhwal challenges the dominant notion that village communities conserved forests in the past due to village-level common property institutions. Instead, he argues that labour shortages, lack of roads and transport, and specific political control by the king helped conserve the forests. Thus, he questions the logic of recent policies that advocate completely decentralised forest management suggesting that changes in underlying labour and commercialisation dynamics might generate adverse outcomes.

The third section has two important articles on gender, both written in the late 1980s — the unrecognised contribution of women to the household by providing fuel and fertiliser through the collection and management of cow dung in Uttar Pradesh and the somewhat surprising empowerment of women in Kerala as a consequence of male migration to the Middle East.

DECLINE OF AGRICULTURE

The final section begins with Dipankar Gupta's recent controversial essay questioning the original sociological conception of the Indian village. He highlights the decline of agriculture as the mainstay of the village economy and the transformation of caste away from being a system of ordering status in the village. The growth of non-farm rural employment and rise of caste and identity politics are also testaments of this change. The re-study of a Tamil Nadu village over the 20 century by J. Harriss, J. Jeyaranjan and K. Nagaraj shows a similar trajectory of a shift away from agriculture and tentative empowerment of Dalits but not to the extent perceived by Gupta.

Given the vast diversity of village life across the subcontinent and the number of thematic ways in which such a collection could be constituted, this book is a commendable effort. However, it is unclear to the reader why these specific essays were chosen. Did the publication of these articles generate important debates in the pages of the EPW? Did they give new theoretical insights challenging the paradigms of the day? We do not get a sense of their place in history or theory. This is in contrast to the excellent introductory essay (a must-read for all students embarking on a study of village India), which traces the historiography of village studies in India highlighting important ideas, which were predominant in different eras in studying the 'rural'.

A minor complaint is that the sequencing of chapters in the book is, surprisingly, not the same as their sequenced description in the short introduction to each section, thus, violating the sense of chronology put together by Jodhka.

All in all, this book can be a useful source of articles for those teaching social anthropology as well as development studies.

VILLAGE SOCIETY: Edited by Surinder S. Jodhka; Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 325.

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