



GANDHI AND NEHRU PERCEPTIONS ON INDIAN VILLAGE SOCIETY

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The formal frame for institutional arrangement for rural reconstruction was envisaged by the Balwanta Rai Mehata committee. The recommended arrangements were expected to bring far-reaching socio-political changes in rural India, which was imagined by diverse trajectories of thought in pre and post independent India. These perspectives played a role in formulating plans of action for reconstruction of rural India. The imagined world of rural India swung between two extremes of romanticism and rejection. Looking in to those perspectives and arguments and contestations woven around them will be appropriate. Dwelling on the earlier debates on the nature and structure of village society and also on the arguments, which range from building blocks of new India as basic units of governance to viewing them as subjects of guided modernization by the state, will provide insights to understand the nature of institutional building and the transformation potential of those institutions.

Before going to deep discussions of Panchayati Raj system in India, we should know the historical understanding of village society by different scholars as well as three main leaders of Indian freedom movement Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. This paper deals with the ideas and understanding of M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru on Indian village system during independent movement particularly and indifferent contexts generally.

PERCEPTIONS OF BRITISH RAJ ON INDIAN VILLAGE:

The colonial administrators viewed the Indian village from the perspective of revenue administration. They saw the village as a rarely changing entity with specified structures and roles etched into it. An old official report of the British

House of Commons on Indian affairs depicts a village (a Telugu village to be specific) as following. A village, geographically considered, is a tract of country comprising some hundred or thousand acres of arable and waste lands; politically viewed it resembles a corporation or township. Its proper establishment of officers and servants consists of the following descriptions: The *potail*, or head inhabitant, who has generally the superintendence of the affairs of the village, settles the disputes of the inhabitants, attends to the police, and performs the duty of collecting the revenue within his village, a duty which his personal influence and minute acquaintance with the situation and concerns of the people render him the best qualified for this charge. The *kurnum* keeps the accounts of cultivation, and registers everything connected with it. The *tallier* and the *totie*, the duty of the former of which consists.... in gaining information of crimes and offenses, and in escorting and protecting persons travelling from one village to another; the province of the latter appearing to be more immediately confined to the village, consisting, among other duties, in guarding the crops and assisting in measuring them. The boundary-man, who preserves the limits of the village, or gives evidence respecting them in cases of dispute, The Superintendent of Tanks and Watercourses distributes the water for the purposes of agriculture. The Brahmin, who performs the village worship, the schoolmaster, who is seen teaching the children in a village to read and write in the sand, the calendar-Brahmin, or astrologer, etc. These officers and servants generally constitute the establishment of a village; but in some parts of the country it is of less extent, some of the duties and functions above described being united in the same person; in others it exceeds the above-named number of individuals. Under this simple form of municipal government, the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial. The boundaries of the villages have been but seldom altered; and though the villages themselves have been sometimes injured, and even desolated by war, famine or disease, the same name, the same limits, the same interests, and even the same families have continued for ages. The inhabitants gave themselves no trouble about the breaking up and divisions of kingdoms; while the village remains entire, they care not to what power it is transferred, or to what

sovereign it devolves; its internal economy remains unchanged. The *potail* is still the head inhabitant, and still acts as the petty judge or magistrate, and collector or renter of the village.ⁱ

It is clear from the description mentioned above that the colonial rulers tried to understand village as a revenue unit that paid its dues systematically and never took interest in which the ruler was to whom it gave its dues. This perspective also understood the hierarchy of power and the social relations revolving around it, but they view that from the point of revenue administration. The unchanging nature of the village mentioned in the report above led to development of the concept of self-sufficient and perennial village as bedrock of Indian reality. Charles Metcalf praised Indian villages as “Little Republics”. Sir Henry Main, the noted British statesman and jurist, also highlighted the civilized nature of villages. It is evident that the village was viewed as a consistent unit of providing revenue and also as a self-governing structure. This understanding helped the British to extract their revenue from the village and eulogize it as a republic undermining the hierarchy and oppression involved in the village structure. The nationalist narrative of the village as a self-sustaining, self-composed entity has its roots in the colonial romantic depiction.

The image of village in the eyes of the statesmen and activists during India’s struggle for independence are very significant to understand the evolution of institutional arrangements for reconstruction of rural India post-independence. Surender Jodhka aptly observes how scholars of modern Indian history have often pointed to the continuities in the colonial constructs of Indian society and the nationalist imaginations of India. The village was an important category where such continuity could be easily observed. However, a closer reading of some of the leading ideologues of nationalist movements also points to significant variations in their views on the substantive realities characterizing rural India. Focusing primarily on writings of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, he looks in to the notion of the village as a central category in the nationalist imaginations and opines there was virtual agreement that it represented the core of the traditional social order of India. This

insight works as a framework to analyze the thinking and practices associated with construction of institutional arrangements for rural development.

Most of the scholars, worked on the social, economic and political position of Indian village with a view to understand the character of the Indian state. For most of them the real India is represented by the villages only. There is a stream of common opinion of western scholars and Indian nationalists that the village is a location of self-sufficiency, productive interdependence and sense of community. It is further opined that the villages needed to be recovered, liberated and transformed for making the Indian nation vibrant and self-sufficient. This view was critically countered by others who viewed the village and its ossified hierarchical nature as retrogressive and inimical to build a modern nation.

A look at the writings and opinions of the three nationalist leaders of India, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar will provide a glimpse of diversity of thoughts on Indian village vis a vis nation building. “Gandhi saw the village as a site of authenticity, for Nehru the village was the source and site of India’s backwardness and for Ambedkar the village was the site of oppression”ⁱⁱ where caste presented itself in its most brutal and inhuman form. Different opinions of these three leaders came from their personal lives which mediated in the making of their understanding of Indian village society. Gandhi and Nehru were born in Hindu upper caste families in semi-urban and urban society respectively. But the life of Ambedkar was different from Gandhi and Nehru. The three works scripted by the three leaders provide a glimpse of their understanding and perception of Indian village and reconstruction. Gandhi wrote a book titled “Hindu Swaraj”ⁱⁱⁱ (1908) and Nehru “Discovery of India” (1946), and Ambedkar wrote the book “Annihilation of Caste”^{iv} (1936). These three works give three different points of view.^v The socio-cultural background from which individuals evolve influences their perceptions and perspectives, which in turn play a major role in developing their world view. Only Ambedkar had village life experience during his childhood days which was different from that of Gandhi. Gandhi and Nehru had very little direct exposure to village life or to caste based discrimination. The commonality between the three of them was mobility of their

families and their academic training in law.

Understanding and interpretation of the village India had a significant role in designing the reconstruction of rural India. High romanticism and absolute cynicism seems to be two opposing views regarding the rural setup which emerged during the decades preceding Indian independence. Nationalist movement also experimented with rural development. The three thinkers and activists had three perspectives about the Indian village. Gandhi's view broadly envisaged reconstructing a self-sufficient and self-governing village with less external intervention. Nehru had a skeptic look at the asymmetric power relations influenced by existing inequalities and believed in using state apparatus to modernize and democratize the village. Ambedkar located the relationship between the hierarchical *Varna* system and the role it played in asymmetry of power and exploitation in the village set up. He openly condemned the romanticist vision of villages as harmonious self-governing units. He was of the opinion that there needs to be a radical social transformation to realize democracy based on dignity and equality.

Gandhi's perception of the Indian village:

Gandhi is identified with the village and its reconstruction in modern India. His social and political philosophy revolved around the idea of the village. He was recognized as father of the idea of the Indian village self-rule (*Grama Swarajya*). He started espousing this idea of the village as a form when he was practicing as an advocate in South Africa and continued to do so until his death. His entire agitation programme was designed against only the British raj, not the landlords and upper castes in India. Though he has born in a town, Porbandar, in a Bania (Business) community he was against city civilization. According to Jodhka, Gandhi used three different ways to project the ideal of the Indian village. One is to establish the equivalence of the Indian civilization with the West. Second, he counter-posed the village to the city and as an alternative to the modern western life and civilization. Finally, he wanted to reform the existing villages of India.

“Our cities are not Indian. India lives in seven lakhs of villages and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city

people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have co-operated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years. It is my belief based on experience that India is daily growing poorer. The circulation of her feet and legs has almost stopped. And if we do not take care, she will collapse altogether. To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which god can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages. God created man to work for his food, and said that those who ate without work were thieves. Eight percent of India is compulsorily thieves half the year. Is it any wonder if India has become vast prison? Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel.”^{vi}

Nehru wrote in his autobiography about Gandhi’s economic ideas as “utterly wrong and impossible of achievement”, ^{vii} and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar criticized the economic philosophy of Gandhi. There was nothing new in the Gandhian analysis of economic ills as attributable to machinery and the civilization built upon it. These were old and worn out arguments, a repetition of Rousseau, Pushkin and Tolstoy. His economics was hopelessly fallacious because the evils produced by the mechanized production system and civilization are not due to machinery as such... They are due to the wrong social organization which has made private property and pursuit of personal gain a matter of absolute sanctity... The remedy therefore is not to condemn machinery and civilization but to alter the organization of society so that the benefits will not be usurped by the few but accrue to all.^{viii} Gandhi celebrated and romanticized the Indian village community as no one else did. “My idea of village Swaraj is that, it is a completely republic, independent of its neighbors for its wants and yet independence many others in which dependence is necessity. Thus every village first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth.”^{ix}

Gandhi further says "My ideal village still exists only in my imagination. After all every human being lives in the world of his own imagination. In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull—he will be all awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness. Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world. There will be no plague, no cholera and no smallpox. Nobody

will be allowed to be idle or to wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labour. Granting all this, I can still envisage a number of things that will have to be organized on a large scale. Perhaps there will even be railways and also post and telegraph offices. I do not know what things there will be or will not be. Nor am I bothered about it. If I can make sure of the essential thing, other things will follow in due course. But if I give up the essential thing, I give up everything.”^x

For Gandhi the real India appeared only in villages. He suggested to the foreign scholars, who came to study Indian society that they “see the heart of India, should ignore big cities.... The true Indian civilization is in the Indian villages....India does not live in its towns but in its villages... A village unit as conceived by me is as strong as the strongest. My imaginary village consists of 1,000 souls.”^{xi}

Gandhi’s idea of the Indian village, it seems, depends more on an environmental perspective rather than traditional. But he wanted to revive Indian traditional social structure, through the protection of handicrafts. “I consider the four varnas alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. The innumerable sub castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion, the better. But I am completely against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions....I see very great use in considering a Brahmin to be always a Brahmin.”^{xii} In Gandhi’s future India, each village would be organized around these four-fold divisions. Self-sustenance means that, there is no dependency between neighboring villages.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s opinion on Indian village:

After Gandhi, Nehru was the most influential leader of the Indian nationalist movement and post-colonial India. Before as well as after Gandhi, Nehru was the most influential modernist ideologue of the Indian National Congress and in post-Independence era he was the first prime minister of independent India. To understand his views on villages we must know about his personal life profile. He was born in Allahabad on 14th November 1889 in a rich Kashmiri Brahmin family. His family was mobile since his grandfather. He wrote himself in his autobiography as “bourgeois”. We do not find Nehru a village romanticist as Gandhi and other congress nationalist leaders. His writing on the Indian village contradicts the basic

idea of the Gandhian philosophy of Gram Swaraj. According Surinder Jodhka, to understand Indian past Nehru's approach was historical in nature, he apparently looked at the old social structure of Indian society from an evolutionary perspective.^{xiii} He identified the three basic concepts of the old Indian social structure as: autonomous village community, caste and the joint family. This is something that can be equated with the traditional idea. The source of understanding of Indian past seems to be very common to Nehru and Gandhi. He shared ideas with Gandhi about the "need for a revival of handicrafts and cottage industry", but went beyond the revivalist tinge of the Gandhian model of reconstruction.

The following statement of Nehru on Indian villages is laced with the modernist critique:

In his seminal work *Discovery of India* Jawaharlal Nehru praised the old caste system, but he developed doubts and changed his opinion, because of the vast changes that took place in Indian society. He wrote "The destruction of caste, which is virtually inevitable, will lead to chaotic disruption of social life unless something in the way of a new social structure, adapted both to the demands of modern times and to the genius of the Indian people, were to be put in its place. The old caste system, to be sure, had much that was good in it. It is never fell victim to the moribund individualism of the west. It tolerated diversity. It produced a society, which was non-competitive and non-acquisitive. Democracy was allowed within each caste, and although the system as a whole was hierarchical, the internal structure of each caste was egalitarian...The ultimate weakness and failing of the caste system and the Indian social structure were that they degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunities to get out of that condition educationally, culturally, or economically. In the context of society too, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor there political democracy, and much less, economic democracy."^{xiv}

He criticized past structures, particularly caste based hierarchies, more and more. At the same time, he blamed the British rulers for disturbing the old economic

equilibrium of the village. When Gandhi was glorifying the Indian “village in a populist language” and considered it as a unit with greater economic and social values, Nehru desired to transform the village structure in social terms rather than economic by using modern technology, and wanted to change agrarian relations in India.

Notes and References

ⁱ Karl Marx, New-York Daily Tribune, June 25, 1853;

see also <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.html>

ⁱⁱ Surinder S. Jodhka, 2012, Village Society, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, p 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ M. K. Gandhi, 1908, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, editor & Publisher Jitendra T. Desai, 1938, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.

^{iv} Annihilation of Caste is an undelivered speech for the conference of Jat Pat Todak Mandal, written in 1936 by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

^v These three books of them are represents their idea of Indian village society. We can understand from these books, what was the primary objective of in their struggles.

^{vi} Gandhi, 1966, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXI. Delhi: Government of India, P. 288-89

^{vii} <https://www2.stetson.edu/secure/history/hy10430/nehrunonviolence.html>

^{viii} <http://www.marxists.org/rerence/archive/mishra/1994/04/x01.html>

^{ix} Gandhi, Harijan, 26-7-1942, 76: 308-9.

^x Gandhi, Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, 5-10-1945; 81:320.

^{xi} Gandhi, Young India, 23-4-1931; 46:12.

^{xii} Christophe Jaffrelot, 2003 India's silent revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India, Hurst & Company,

^{xiii} Surinder S. Jodhka, ed. 2012, Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, in Village Society, Essays from EPW, Orient Blackswan, Hyd.

^{xiv} Nehru, 1948, Discovery of India, P.242 - 257