Like many others born and brought up in a village, I too have looked at the village as a natural ontological entity for the first twenty years of my life. There were big villages and small villages, no doubt, but they all appeared to be substantially different from towns and cities where adult men of my village would go for higher education or in search of employment. Also, all the important offices would be located in **shahars** (towns). Very often, my fellow villagers would go to these **shahars** on official business at courts and in myriad other offices of the government, and return home with bagful of things of everyday use which were mainly available only in **shahars**.

Following the common biographical trajectory of my seniors in the village, I too went to a city for college and university education. However, unlike most of them, I went to a ‘bigger’ city. Undeniably, this bigger city was permeated with the imagery of the village. Later, I came to partly make sense of this pervasive rural ethos and imagery, courtesy a course on urban sociology which introduced me to the concept of ‘urban villages’. The course got over and I got my degree, but the ambiguities remained. My Jat friends in Delhi would frequently ask: **Gaon kab jaa rahe ho? Gaon se kab aaye?** (When are you going to the village? When did you return from the village?) These innocuous questions used to annoy some of my friends, who were not from the **gaon**, as I was, but who had their houses in cities like Patna or Muzaffarpur. They used to wonder why these ‘brainless’ Jats equate everything with **Gaon**!

Subsequently, I moved to a still bigger city for further education. In Mumbai, during the viva-voce of my M. Phil. Course, I realised that my examiner, the late Dr. Vikash N. Pandey, then a Reader in the Unit for Rural Studies at the
Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), was equally troubled with some of the ideas which had yet to take proper shape in a neophyte like me: the idea of the rural. What is a ‘village’? How to look at ‘rurality’? These were some of the questions which were already on Pandey’s academic agenda.

However, my interaction with Dr. Pandey halted for a while as I shifted to Goa on an assignment as an ad hoc Lecturer in Sociology at the Goa University. By a lucky coincidence in 1998, I was able to resume my interrupted conversation with Dr. Pandey, as I got an opportunity to attend a course on ‘Data Analysis in Social Sciences’ at TISS. Our conversation led to further ambiguities. Nonetheless, the theme – the idea of the village - appeared exciting to both of us. But then logistics of the Ph.D. research had yet to be sorted out. Being a temporary staff at the University, I was not too sure if I would get long leave of absence to frequently visit TISS in connection with my Ph.D. As a consequence, these ideas, howsoever exciting, remained at the level of ideas. It took almost more than a year and a half to firm up these ideas in the form of a Ph.D. research proposal.

Pleasantly, something fortuitous happened and a great opportunity came my way. I consider it my great good fortune that Prof. N. Jayaram joined the Department of Sociology as its first Professor, and the Head, in April 1999. In him, I found not only an inspiring senior colleague but also an enabling and encouraging research guide. I would not have bargained for the better. On one of those memorable evening walks, he casually asked me if I had thought of some researchable ideas. I felt encouraged and shared with him some of the vague ideas I had in mind courtesy Dr. Pandey. Being a seasoned research guide, he asked me to put down these ideas on a piece of paper. That was the beginning of this thesis. I
sincerely believe that this thesis would have taken many more years to see the light of the day had not it been for Prof. Jayaram’s keen interest and active support.

Once I registered as a candidate for Ph.D. in Sociology at the Goa University in September 1999, work progressed at snail’s pace, partly owing to my assignments as a teacher and largely due to what Prof. Jayaram would gently remind me as my mismanagement of time. Now that the research has reached this stage of the thesis, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Jayaram for having been such an affable and meticulous guide. He frequently went beyond the call of his duty and bestowed much care even in the minute details of the preparation of this thesis. True, I could not come up to his expectation of meticulousness, academic rigour and the attention to details. Yet, I am convinced that my apprenticeship as a researcher has been in the right direction. For this, and for his many other contributions, I am deeply indebted to him. My sincere thanks are due to him for not simply having been such a wonderful guide but also for having shown me a glimpse of what a world of scholarly vocation is all about. I will be failing in my duty if I forget to mention his great sense of humour that found frequent expression as crisp comments on the margins of my draft chapters.

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