CHAPTER 2
COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE VILLAGE

‘To effect a settlement of the land revenue’ was the first major administrative act of the British government, so wrote Sir Henry Sumner Maine (1871: 19) way back in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the land revenue settlement did more than determine revenue. It defined rights to land and devised different mechanisms for revenue assessment and collection. It was also an exercise in how best to fit the disparate facts of India’s social order into the proper modes of British explanation. In the process, it constructed, *ipso facto*, a new idiom of the village and signalled a new level of involvement of the (colonial) state in the village.

We can look at the land revenue settlement as an exercise of historic significance which brought the colonial state and the native village face to face. The processes and practices of land settlement drew Indian village into the British conception of the rule of law and, henceforth, the village stayed put as a seminal constituent of the colonial construction of Indian society. Although the village remained the primary site for the constant administrative interface between the ruler (British) and the ruled (Indians), it acquired larger associations in the ruler’s idiom. This chapter is an attempt to understand that idiom by reviewing the debate on the issue. Although the literature on the village is polyglot in character, for the immediate purpose, we rely principally on the literature arising out of the administrative-historical studies of the village.

The village offers us an entry point to understand the history and character of colonial forms of knowledge. We firmly believe that, since the colonial state significantly affected the basic structures of Indian life, the colonial construction of the village affords us a peep into our own past and present. Moreover, following
Inden (1986 and 1990), Cohn (1987 and 1997) and Dirks (1987 and 2001), we assert that the exercise of power and the accumulation of knowledge were both parts of a larger colonial project. The British attempt to understand the nature of Indian society was inseparable from their effort to design an ideology that would sustain their rule over it. That is, the administrative practices of the colonial regime cannot be separated from the colonial construction of Indian society. For us, then, colonialism has been as much about policies as about theories and strategies of representation (see also Pant 1987; Prakash 1990 and 1995; Ahmad 1991; Metcalf 1998).

As the British went along comprehending India, using their own forms of knowing and thinking, they altered the nature of Indian knowledge. For instance, their engagement with the village, howsoever concerned it was with the practical problem of setting agrarian policies, was not a matter simply of endorsing whatever relations of production existing within village, but it also involved active social engineering. As Smith (1996) has shown, in his remarkable study of the changing nature of village records (from 1822 to 1887) in the Ludhiana district in Punjab, village statistics contained great details not only of land rights but also more general aspects of social organisation. In effect, the registration of rights in the land revenue settlements meant fitting people into pre-determined legal categories and pressing the management of village affairs into a uniform mould. Since the exact shape of the legal mould was not determined overnight, the village presents us with a vantage point to examine the British understanding of the Indian society and the colonial administration’s use of what were considered to be the key units of that society (see Smith 1996: 61, 74-77; see also Cohn 1997: 57-75).
As a relationship based on a definitive political asymmetry of power, colonialism facilitated increasing importance of the British conception of India and the Indian institutions. In due course, and more so after gaining in confidence with the annexation of the last vestiges of native rule such as those of the Marathas and in Punjab, the British became the authoritative and effective giver of value to things Indian. Since theirs was not an antiquarian interest in India, nor were they propelled by a disinterested love of truth, their understanding as the rulers of India came to be imposed on all, including Indians themselves. For example, it was the British who defined the value and meaning of the Indian village in a way that its echoes are yet to die down. As Smith (1996: 3) remarks, 'the discourse of knowledge about Indian society is still to some extent trapped by the terms under which official records and reports were produced during the period of British rule'.

Until the early twentieth century, Indians were largely bystanders to the discussions which established meaning and value for the British, be it village, caste or Hinduism. Even when Indians entered into the discussion, both the agenda and its terms of discourse were already set. Arguably, the nineteenth-century debate on the nature of the Indian village community has determined the nature of the discourse on the Indian village since then (see Parasher 1992: 17-42). Given the salience of this debate in historical and contemporary terms, this chapter considers the colonial ideas regarding the village. Specifically, our focus is on how the British conceptualised India, and its past and present, within the terms of their intellectual thought. Also, the Chapter has less to do with the Indian village as such than the ideas about it as found in the works of the colonial scholar-administrators.

Thus, the specific career of the term 'village' is seen here as part of the history of colonial knowledge about India and the use of that knowledge in official
projects. However, our intention is not to examine facticity of the British views in relation to supposedly indigenous categories and forms of thought concerning the village. We are not concerned with collecting and representing the indigenous categories of thought on village, nor do we want simply to show the misrepresentation of village by colonial rulers. Ours is not an exercise in ethnosociology of Indian village (cf. Marriott 1990). Rather than unravelling 'the distorting influence of colonial history and western social scientific categories', we endeavour to foreground the capacity of the colonial state to reconstruct fundamental aspects of Indian society - village in the instant case.

The Indian Village: Genealogy of a Stereotype

A seasoned historian like Stokes (1978) has expressed his despair at extracting the village out of the historical morass caused by interlocking of land tenures with tax collection structures in an ancient order of civilisation. Admittedly, the force of subconscious ideology and the practical need to stabilise the tax system within an impersonal bureaucracy prompted the British at the outset of colonial rule to refashion the village. How far the British distorted and misunderstood the village in consequence, has remained a controversy in historiography. They have been charged with losing sight of the discrepancy between the British law and the Indian fact. Quite often, 'the legal description of the society failed to fit the economical and sociological' (Stokes 1978: 3). Nonetheless, the village as the working unit of rural society was reconstituted during the British rule.7

It is now a truism in social science literature that the village was the proclaimed basis of colonial rule. However, there was nothing natural about the village as the basic unit of territorial organisation. A close historical scrutiny
reveals it to be a discovery of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. As Mukherjee (1996: 70) argues,

It is significant to note that although there were in the eighteenth century a number of officers who were equally eager to rule India according to the 'Indian constitution', they did not consider state in India to be a congeries of 'little republic'. It would seem that the British officers of the Munro school idealised the Indian villages to make a model of the Indian constitution which corresponded with their romantic conservative notion of an ideal polity. In other words, they used the 'village community' as a peg on which to hang a theory of British-Indian administration.

In fact, the literature on the nature of the Indian village community traces back to Thomas Munro's reports on Madras and the first decade of the nineteenth century. The discovery of this cornerstone of society started mundanely, as the colonial administrators felt the need to collect and compile factual information about land settlements and revenue collection. Indeed, most of the characterisations of the village are contained in the despatches of senior British officers engaged in land revenue administration. One such despatch, which formed the basis for discussions in the British House of Commons in 1812-13 on the renewal of the East India Company's charter, outlined the idea of the village as a mini republic. More particularly, it is in Thomas Munro's report on the Ceded Districts of Madras (1806) that one comes across the initial stereotype of the village as a little republic.

Like his contemporaries, Munro was less concerned with the village as such than the mode of land settlement. His primary interest was to plead and win the case for ryotwari settlement in the Madras Presidency as against Bengal Presidency's permanent settlement. In his acrimonious debate with Francis Ellis, he showed that his advocacy of ryotwari respects the principles of native tradition and that he was merely adhering to indigenous precedents. Once Munro became the Governor in 1820 and established ryotwari as the definitive legal basis for land
settlements in the Madras Presidency, his formulations became part of the official wisdom.

Some of these administrative reports set the tone for future debate on the nature and character of Indian village. In the subsequent literature we find repetitions and variations on the same set of themes which formed part of the Fifth Report. What is noteworthy, however, is that their celebration of the Indian village is guided more by the ideology of particular administrator/s than the characteristics that the village actually displayed. Stokes (1959) identifies administrators, such as Munro (1761-1827), Malcolm (1769-1833), Elphinstone (1779-1859) and Metcalfe (1785-1846), who served under Lord Wellesley, the Governor General (1798-1805), as the chief proponents of the republican nature of the Indian village. Munro was the leader and founder of their particular school of thought. While sharing a certain emotional kinship with the heritage of the past, these Romantic Paternalists, as Stokes labels them, were horrified at the wanton uprooting of an immemorial system of society. In their general political orientation, they were antithetical to the liberal attempt to anglicise, assimilate and reform Indian society. From their attitudes of romanticism and paternalism flowed a certain conservatism of thought which made them challenge and resist the policy of applying British constitutional principles to the Indian administration. In terms of routine administration it meant countering the spirit of Cornwallis system.

Whereas Munro was in favour of the ryotwari (cultivator-wise) system of land settlement, Metcalfe made a powerful advocacy of the mahalwari (village-wise) settlement. Madras and Bombay Presidencies largely followed ryotwari, but, in the North-West provinces, Metcalfe ensured that the village communities were made the basis of revenue settlement (see Bearce 1961). Clearly, their advocacy
for a particular type of revenue system was contingent on their political philosophy. Their opposition to the utilitarian *laissez-faire* was reflected in their attempts to preserve something of the methods and institutions of Indian society. To the extent that they were against remoulding India in the image of the West, they can be regarded as the true conservative elements in the history of British India. Their opposition to the Cornwallis system was, in essence, an opposition to the imposition of English ideas and institutions on Indian society. In their attempt to cushion the impact of foreign dominion they resuscitated 'unchanging village republics' as a sign of their benevolent paternalism. Village communities provided them with a system of indirect rule without much meddling in Indian affairs. They firmly believed that the ultimate objective of their variant of land settlement was the protection of the (village) community by the government and not against it. Fearful of the social effects of the sudden dissolution of the co-sharing village community, they were in favour of fitting the colonial administration to the native frame of society. Their awareness of the wholly artificial and foreign character of administration made them hesitant and wary of interfering with the prevailing forms of society. They were convinced that once law and order had been established and property rights in the soil defined and land revenue fixed in cash, there was no need to subject the village to disruptive changes and disastrous effects of the *Anglicisation* drive. For them, *Anglicists*\(^\text{12}\) were responsible for setting aside the immemorial institutions of the native people and erecting in its place an incomprehensible technical form of law which was unsuited to the native genius. In other words, these paternalists were all set to challenge the dominion exercised by utilitarianism\(^\text{13}\) and show that utilitarian principles were not of absolute and universal validity. Since utilitarianism and its underlying principles were
conditional truths by virtue of their historical origins, there was the urgent necessity of restraint in pressing Western reforms upon an oriental society like India. To them, unbridled utilitarianism only increased the danger of a rapid disintegration of Indian society. Munro went to the extent of advocating the restoration of the jurisdiction of the village panchayats so as to prevent the further erosion of this mainstay of the social order (see *Ibid.*: 14-18, 119).

It is difficult to make out how much of the Indian village was the British construction in terms of empirical facts. It is possible that a phenomenon one labels as the product of foreign impact may have actually been Indian in origin. The intrusive institution, especially when it is backed by political power, may reinforce the indigenous institution, when they both share something in common, giving a prominence it did not have under the old system, for example, the *ryotwari* (Embree 1969: 50). Thus, at most we can talk of the nineteenth-century Indian village more as an *idea* than a *fact*. Yet, the independent momentum of administrative systems once under way ensured that there was no going back.

Also, the village got implicated in the differing perceptions of the unit of land measurement of the British and the Indian. In place of the English idea of 'estate' as a unit of land management, paternalists like Metcalfe favoured the Indian idea of 'mahal' as a unit of land measurement. In fact, one difficulty facing Westerners - whether nineteenth-century administrators or twentieth-century economists - while analysing the Indian village is the number of differences in units of thought between the people in control of the Indian countryside and the Englishman who ruled them. There were differences in thought about the objectives of secular life and about how these objectives fitted together, and in the situations in which they reasoned (Neale 1990: 14-15). The contending perceptions
of the village emanated from these fundamental differences in the categories of thought as well.

Ironically, the village community was, used as an argument against the generalisation of Munro's ryotwari, both in Madras and in Delhi. Those who were in favour of mauzawari or mahalwari shared the apprehension that direct engagement for revenue with each separate landholder or cultivator (that is, ryotwari) might lead to the destruction of the original constitution of the village. Though the early administrative literature of the nineteenth century does not talk of the community, the stereotyping of the village emanates from its community character.

The colonial stereotyping of the village community had two principal ingredients: (1) the portrayal of the village as an idyllic and utopian political community - a society of equals, and (2) its characterisation as a body of co-sharers of the soil.

This emphasis on the village community as a political entity tended to ignore or, at least, underplay the facts of dominance and hierarchy within the village. The stability and isolation of the village and its political independence from the state were over-emphasised. Given the political fluidity that was evidenced at the macro-level, the permanence of the village held a great attraction. This nearly self-sufficient and almost independent character of the village community led Metcalfe declare, 'I admire the structure the village communities', and add stylistically,
they arm and fortify themselves: an hostile army passes through the country; the village communities collect their cattle within walls, and let the enemy pass unprovoked. If plunder and devastation be directed against themselves and forced employed be irresistible, they flee to friendly villages at a distance; but, when the storm has passed over, they return and resume their occupations. If a country remain for a series of yeas the scene of continued pillage and massacre, so that villages cannot be inhabited, the scattered villagers nevertheless return whenever the power peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away, but the succeeding generation will return. The sons will take the place of their fathers; the same site for the village, the same positions for the houses, the same lands will be reoccupied by the descendants of those who were driven out when the village was depopulated; and it is not a trifling matter that will drive them out, for they will often maintain their position through times of disturbance and convulsion, and acquire strength sufficient to resist pillage and oppression with success. This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered, and is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence (cited in Dewey 1972: 297). 

Yet his romanticised vision of the village was difficult to reconcile with the community it described. Although the disruptions of the later eighteenth century had enforced a great degree of self-reliance upon the Indian village, it was much less isolated from the state and the market, and much less egalitarian than Metcalfe's rhetoric implied. The community of co-sharers in the land rarely encompassed the entire population. Nevertheless, Metcalfe's text resonated through the years. Neither the decline of romanticism, nor that of the independent village community itself could dislodge Metcalfe's characterisation of the village. Surprisingly, when village was being substantially incorporated into a system of general law and colonial economy, its alleged virtues of political autonomy and economic self-reliance were gaining ground. This clearly reveals the elements of nostalgia in the way village was perceived by administrators like Metcalfe.

Viewed thus, the stereotyping of the village lay in the quantum leap from the economic self-sufficiency and internal organisation of the village as an economic-political group to the supposed political independence of the village (Dumont 1970: 118). One finds in these early administrative accounts of the
village no reference to the existence of inequality. This could be because inequality and hierarchy were considered to be natural and in tune with the spirit of the age. However, the village tends to acquire a metaphoric content as a ‘republic’, ‘commonwealth’, or ‘state’ by virtue of its being an ordered society in miniature. Thus, Elphinstone, in one of the most forceful articulation of the village as political society, proclaims: ‘these communities contain in miniature all the materials of a State within themselves, and are almost sufficient to protect their members, if all governments are withdrawn’ (cited in Ibid.: 117).

The village community’s apparent ability to preserve amidst the disintegration of larger forms of political and social organisation gets corroborated by Malcolm, another romantic paternalist, in his memoirs of Central India:

Never did a country afford such proofs of the imperishable nature of this admirable institution. After the Pindarry war, every encouragement was held out for the inhabitants to return to their desolate homes. In several districts, particularly those near Nerbudda, many of the villages had been waste for more than thirty years. The inhabitants who had been scattered, followed all occupations: many Potails, who had been obliged to leave their lands, had become plunderers, and remained at or near their ruined villages; some of their relations and friends followed their example; others cultivated grounds at a distance of several hundred miles from their homes; while a great majority went to the large towns, where they found a temporary asylum, and obtained subsistence by labouring in gardens or fields. But there is no people in whose hearts the love of the spot where they were born seems more deeply implanted than the Hindus; and those of Central India, under all their miseries and dispersion, appear never for a moment to have given up the hope of being restored to their homes. The families of each village, though remote from each other, maintained a constant communication - intermarriages were made, and the links that bound them together were only strengthened by adversity. When convinced that tranquility was established they flocked to their roofless houses. Infant Potails (the second and third in descent from the emigrator) were in many cases carried at the head of these parties. When they reached their villages, every wall of a house, every field was taken possession of by the owner or cultivator, without dispute or litigation amongst themselves or with government; and in a few days everything was in progress as if it had never been disturbed (cited in Dewey 1972: 297-98).

The second aspect of the village stereotype, namely, that of a corporate body of persons sharing right in a common territory, is linked to the first one, for the idea of the village as a political community presupposes economic self-
sufficiency. This view of the village finds its initial articulation in Ellis’s *Report on Mirasi Rights* (1814). Also, it is this aspect of the village community which was catapulted to the arena of high theory by Maine and Marx (see Chapter 3).

Thus, the essence of all such characterisation of the village was a euphoric celebration of its inner elasticity as a system. Romantic conservatives were attracted to its permanence, more so when it was seen in relation to highly volatile and fluid character of the Indian state. Its high degree of internal cohesion and enduring solidarity, and its constitution as the sum total of mutually dependent groups rather than mutually antagonistic classes, provided the romantics the raw material on which to construct their image of the Indian village. In the inner-directed, tranquil, unchanging rhythm of the Indian village lay the secret of the wisdom of Indian civilisation.

However, it should be noted that the enthusiastic reception accorded to the Indian village by these romantic paternalists was not shared by one and all. In a way, the village was caught in the larger political battles of the day between ‘conservatives’ and ‘radicals’. For James Fitzjames Stephen (1829-1894), the fact that the creation of private rights and the elimination of custom was leading to the decline of the village communities, should not give rise to any false sentiment of regret:

The fact that the institutions of a village community throw light on the institutions of modern Europe, and the fact that village communities have altered but little for many centuries, prove only that society in India has remained for a great number of centuries in a stagnant condition, unfavourable to the growth of wealth, intelligence, political experience, and the moral and intellectual changes which are implied in these processes. The condition of India for centuries past shows what the village communities are really worth. Nothing that deserves the name of a political institution at all can be ruder or less satisfactory in its results. They are, in fact, a crude form of socialism, paralysing the growth of individual energy and all its consequences. The continuation of such a state of society is radically inconsistent with the fundamental principles of our rule both in theory and in practice (quoted in Stokes 1959: 280).
Stephen denounced the sentimental outcry of the conservative paternalists as regards the break-up of the village communities and had no love lost for the simple communities. He thought that the task of insulating the Indian village from further change was well-nigh impossible. Similarly, John Strachey (1823-1907) criticised the 'fashion of commending the Hindoos, their laws, their government'. He wondered, '...till these late discoveries it was generally admitted that the native system of administration was oppressive and vicious and that the faster we departed from them the better' (quoted in Dumont 1970: 117). He adds,

No great changes can be brought about without some cause for regret. That the full recognition of individual property rights will bring with it the dissolution of the ancient village institutions seems indisputable, but they were necessarily doomed to decay with the establishment of good government and the progress of civilisation. The objects which they were so admirably adapted to fulfil are gradually passing away. The power which their constitution gave them of passive resistance to oppression is now no longer needed. As long as these institutions form the basis of society, any large amount of progress is impossible (quoted in Dewey 1972: 299-300).

Administrators like Stephen and Strachey distrusted the sentimental attachment of the paternalists to the Indian village. For them, moreover, as a matter of conviction, the truths of political economy should triumph over sentiment, and that only in a system of free exchange and completely free individual property rights could the prosperity of the people be fully secured. Naturally, this meant stringent application of utilitarian doctrines to India irrespective of its effects on the village community.

So, the idealised Indian village community, whether derived from a certain romantic imagination or subject to utilitarian onslaught, was used to serve purposes of a very different order. The idea of the village community emerged out of fiscal and administrative concerns of the British rule in India. Romantics used it as part of the defence of the award of revenue collection rights to these corporate village
bodies rather than landlords or individual cultivators. For officials like Metcalfe, it was easier to rule by incorporating rather than destroying such entrenched institutions. Even the utilitarians, who disparaged the village community, acknowledged its cohesion and independence. They only feared that the village might act as an impediment to their plans for an agrarian revolution in India. Thus, all of them agreed that the Indian village has failed to grow after a certain stage of development largely because of India’s isolation. For them, the sole purpose of the British rule in India was to improve it, albeit they had differing prescriptions for it. In either way, the Indian village was used to rationalise the British rule in India. The similarity between the proponents of the two schools of thought has been noted by Dewey (1972: 296):

Proponents of the two systems [the romantic conservatives favouring mahalwari settlement of the North-West provinces and the utilitarian radicals favouring ryotwari settlement of Bombay Presidency] conflicted; and from their conflict two distinct images of the village community emerged. These images were ideal types; abstracts of the aspects of the village community which their authors wished to emphasise. But despite the fact that they were intended to justify two very different revenue systems, both images were surprisingly alike; for conservatives and utilitarians disagreed not so much over what the characteristics of the village community were as over whether an agreed set of characteristics was or was not desirable.

Thus, policy and ideology combined to embed the Indian ‘village republic’ in the broader framework of the British colonial enterprise. With the consequent desire to dampen the pace of social change, more so after the Mutiny, the village community served the imperial need to fall back upon an unchanging and unthreatening institution. It came handy for imbuing the Raj as a protector of native institutions. The ideological assertion of its enduring permanence fitted well in the colonisers’ quest for a secure agrarian order. It could be seen as an ultimate refuge against those forces of disorder which the Mutiny had unleashed.
In a way, the very nature of the British rule necessitated a particular theory of Indian village, so that Indian realities could be fashioned not only to justify the rule but also its moral overtones (see Upadhya 2001). Also, the view that 'the chaos, anarchy existed at a higher level of the socio-political system: what was enduring and unchanging was an institution - the village', was in tune with the official policy in general and in framing the land tenure legislation in particular (Cohn 1997: 103). Ludden (1995) has argued that Munro's representation of the village community as the basic unit of Indian society led to the formulation of colonial policies around the village, which in turn, enhanced the political and economic salience of the village.

One has to remember is that on one's attitudes to the village community depended the future direction of a given civilization, so, at least, it seemed to colonial scholar-administrators. If the village community was an approved form of organisation, then its conservation became the primary duty of the state. Conversely, if it was condemned, then the state was called upon to hasten the pace of its dissolution through a *laissez-faire*-induced social revolution. In any case, attitudes to the village community were not so much direct responses to its empirical characteristics as were the outcomes of the corollaries of attitudes to the great political doctrines of the day, namely, utilitarianism. Thus, the very description of the village community's characteristics was conditioned by one's general political orientation (Dewey 1972: 292-94). In Chapter 3 we will see how the discussion of the village community was propelled from the lowly politico-administrative concerns of the contending administrators and revenue officials to the high ground of social theory, courtesy Maine and Marx.
Village and the Making of an Agrarian Territory

The constitution of the village as a well-circumscribed area amenable to revenue assessment is an inevitable part of the state’s mapping of the agrarian territory. Since the state has always been concerned with various aspects of agricultural organisation, it has wielded its authority to regulate and monitor the territorial units of agricultural organisation. As Ludden (1999: 34) asserts, ‘organising agriculture in the circumscribed spaces and legitimating state authority in them have historically been the central concern of the state’.

True, the state has historically been powerful in relation to the individual village. It has shaped property rights and revenue demands with respect to land. However, often the basic unit for this relationship was not the village at all. At times, revenue would be settled on the basis of smaller estates within the village. Likewise, many a times, larger estates comprising several villages would be the basis for revenue settlement. Marriott (1955a: 184) has shown how for the first time the whole countryside was divided into village units for administration with reference to *mahalwari* system of land tenure. In his ‘Directions for Revenue Officers’ (1844-1848), James Thomason (1804-1853) directed that wherever possible, the whole body of proprietors in each village should be made individually and collectively responsible for paying the land tax. This was a novel requirement, as the previous Mughal policy had often been to recognise estates as units even when they cut across several villages it. In the new system, one finds some sort of a disposition to treat each village as if it were a great family. In this sense, the modern ideas of territorial organisation of land (based on the revenue village) are said to be derived from colonial times (see Breman 1987). In fact, this was true for the whole of colonial Asia. Thus, in India, as in much of the colonised world,
village became a lynch-pin in the overall colonial regulation of agrarian territory. It helped the new rulers in the settlement of farming regions in synch with their laws of landed property and polices of revenue collection.

By 1815, the colonial rulers had settled upon the village as the basic unit of agrarian administration. While overhauling the earlier territorial organisation and erasing the traces of the previous forms of territorial organisation, the British rule enshrined the village community as the core economic, political, and social unit. This projection of the village as the elemental unit of Indian socio-economic organisation subserved several functions. In ideological terms, the village came to represent

a survival of agrarian tradition and the administrative foundation of agrarian modernity... The territory called 'India' became traditional and the village and family farm became its elemental units. The cultural construct called 'India' came to rest on the idea that one basic cultural logic did in fact organise agriculture in all its constituent (village) territories from ancient to modern times (Ludden 1999: 34.).

It is noteworthy that, as the village was being made the basis of a new type of territorial organisation, some of the British administrators also found in the Indian village a repository of 'authentic' tradition and culture. It was invested with a romantic aura that subsequently led to the recurring characterisation of the village as the self-sufficient little republic. Since that time stable, traditional village societies have been taken to be territories of ancient agrarian civilisation which had survived basically unchanged over the millennia before colonialism (see supra). In a way, it was an archetypal case of 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) where modernity invented traditions of civilisation in its own image. According to Ludden, 'the modern invention of civilisation territories continues a very old elite project of using narration to organise agrarian territories' (Ibid.: 173).
By projecting the map of British India back into history of ancient times, the British sought to legitimate its authority over all the villages in this agrarian territory. Also, this projection helped achieve a continuity of discourse where the village represents a constant unit of agrarian order from ancient times to the present. To quote Ludden, ‘village becomes that part of agrarian space which can be effectively bounded physically and culturally and marked as a spatial domain for organised state power and activity’ (Ibid.). Thus, under the colonial dispensation, the *revenue village* became the elemental unit of agrarian administration.

This attempt to create a new type of unified agrarian territory around the idea of the village was bound to dislodge earlier conceptualisations of the village. As the British went about mapping and surveying every inch of the agrarian territory, and organise it in terms of the cellular units of the village, they inflicted enormous violence on those conceptualisations that considered villages as locales of social power outside the state. Even today there is a persistent discrepancy between what the *state calls* ‘village’ and what the *villagers think* is ‘village’ (see Daniel 1984).

A survey of historical literature tells us that, in terms of local political and power structures, the village *per se* was not universally the key unit. In olden days, powerful notables determined where one revenue village ended and another began. The state did not have so direct a say in deciding the land rights. Until the 1870s, many struggles for the control of land occurred outside the purview of the state. In a few cases, land rights were granted as part of the remuneration of state functionaries. There was a curious amalgam of land rights and official status. Moreover, people with rights to land exercised various types and degrees of power
over the local territory and its inhabitants. In other words, the boundaries remained fuzzy among local politics, society, law, police and administration as land rights were the chief lever of power. In a restricted sense, those who controlled land also controlled much of civic and judicial administration. In brief, historically the village has not been a unit for economic administration or political representation (see Cohn 1987; Breman et al. 1997).

Viewed thus, the creation of ‘revenue villages’ was part of the making of modern institutions that delimited precisely the content of property rights in British India. The modern making of the village, however, took a long time. It set into motion processes that signalled a definitive shift in power relations between localities and the imperial state. That is, the emergence of the village as the key unit of administration not only organised agrarian territories and farming regions, but also altered local power relations throughout India in the nineteenth century (see Ludden 1999: 173-74).

Under the colonial dispensation, the definition and delimitation of localities were no longer the handiwork of powerful families and caste groups. They assumed an official institutional form. Even when village communities were organised around socially dominant landed families, they became part of the administrative jurisdiction of urban centres that housed government offices. Village thus organised was thought appropriate for modernisation under the joint auspices of the market economy and state policies. It was remoulded in the hope of unleashing its progressive potential while dismantling old bottlenecks, such as the ambiguity and confusion about land rights, prohibitive social controls, and the dominance of caste, sect, and other forms of cultural collectivity. The then-prevailing theories of culture and modernisation fuelled the distinctive shaping of
the Indian village and tried to naturalise it as an essential component of the new agrarian social order. The shaping of the village was largely the outcome of the supposed theoretical opposition that had thus emerged between 'Europe's competitive, individualist rationalism and Asia's collective, traditional, peasant community consciousness' (*Ibid.*: 178, 222). This theoretical dualism has always highlighted the co-operative and harmonious aspects of the ontology of village while underplaying its internal diversity and conflict. In the colonialist reading, village communities formed solid collective identities with closed unitary moral economies.

There were other factors which made the village the basic unit of Indian society. In consolidating their rule over India, the British encountered an all-pervasive customary rights and practices associated with the land. The control of land was at the core of an unusually long and complicated chain of patron-client relationships. These multi-layered claims on land, and the control of the landed gentry on a proportion of the levied taxation, and their appropriation of undue politico-administrative powers at the local level appeared to be dispensable nuisances to the highly technocratic character of the colonial bureaucracy. Firstly, the British were inspired by a quest for an orderly exercise of authority and a determination to prevent the siphoning of the obligations in cash and kind from the population by the supra-local lords. As their intervention in the native society and economy increased, they were forced to encounter a complex social arrangements and institutional frameworks criss-crossing the village. The latter's mechanistic adherence to rules and regulations left little allowance for the customs of the land. Projecting village as the key unit helped them get rid of a 'feudally-structured intermediate third sphere between state and the people' full of a wide range of
large and small middlemen. Furthermore, ‘Village reified in a closed and inwardly oriented agrarian settlement helped them justify their efforts as a means to restore the original bipolar situation’ (Breman 1997: 18).

Secondly, by making the village the organising principle of society, the British assured themselves getting back the local administrative and political overheads from the village as collectivity. As Breman (ibid.: 19) puts it, ‘restoration of so-called tradition can thus be explained, with some justification, as a principle of cheap government’. Lastly, the projection of local economy and administration as a village avoided the need to split up the rural habitants into various categories with different or even contradictory needs and interests. In retrospect, the singular absence of the internal affairs of the village as subject of research and policy-making corroborates this. Colonial research came to a halt at the village boundary and did not penetrate its inner domain, notwithstanding many administrative instances where more concrete information was hastily and superficially collected.

In all events, the colonial rulers bothered only about the estimation of land levy and the mechanism of its collection. They could care less about how such levies were to be generated and shared among the country folk. The dichotomy thus constructed by the colonial state consisted of two spheres, which complemented one another in a manner that led to mutual exclusion. The encapsulated village was put on a pedestal, but the high ideological content of this tour de force made it impossible to penetrate the nucleus of rural society in order to compile facts and figures. No wonder then that, instead of verification of the actual state of affairs, the application of sweeping theories held the sway (see Breman 1997).
Dewey (1972) makes a similar argument when he says that more directly dictated by the administrative convenience was the need to reduce social reality to a bi-polar constellation: state and village. There was an attempt to give content to the dictum ‘the princes at court, the peasants in the village’, so that an authentic original situation is restored. To quote Cohn (1987: 162),

the categorical or conceptual thinking about villages directed attention away from, internal politics in villages and from questions of the nature of actual social relations, of the distribution of wealth, of what was happening to agricultural production; in short the Victorians were not concerned with what the actual conditions of life in the villages were but with general theoretical questions derived from social theory of the day.

**Indian Village and the Colonial Typology of Civilisations**

In the charged nineteenth-century debate village was seen not merely as a historical relic but was imbued with much contemporary relevance. For the Westerners, the village community stood for a world that they had lost, thanks to the industrial revolution and the changes it had generated. Since it was a world almost lost, depending on one’s ideological predilections, it could be embedded in one’s version of ‘progress’ or ‘degeneration’ in relation to the present. For romantics, idyllic village communities of the past realised those qualities of life that they highly valued and craved for, and which could indeed be realised in some future utopia. Those who were on the side of progress, and there were many, set out to debunk the idyllic image of the past village community by associating it with economic inequality, a rigidly stratified and stagnant society and its historic subordination to arbitrary powers. As history and progress were unremitting preoccupations of the nineteenth-century Victorian mind, the conceptualisation of village in this framework was itself only an instance of a larger problematic that turned on a (lack of) commitment to progress.
Admittedly, village became a pretext to establish the civilisational stage to which India’s extant conditions corresponded. Through a reading of the Indian village, the task of presenting the details of such a civilisational hierarchy was sought to be achieved. In this sense, the study of the Indian village cannot be seen in isolation of this primary and explicit obsession of the British mind. In other words, any reading of India’s past and present was a tool in the British hand so that the latter could establish the precise logistics of civilisational hierarchy. From the perspective of the Victorian social thought, which is what concerns us here in this chapter, India was an abstraction, ‘variously represented through social structure, religion, mythology, and the pervasive influence of unreason, all embodied and represented in its history’. Not only its singularity and distinctiveness were simply played down but also they were related to a vision of universal history that is itself ‘tethered to an eschatology of progress’. India in general, and the Indian village in particular, had only a provisional status in this grand universal schema of history that the colonialists constructed. Whatever value Indian institutions had was only with reference to illumining the said scheme of progress and civilisational typology (Mehta 1999: 111).

Naturally, construction of a history for India became the major interpretative strategy of the British. It was through her history (and the village was to play a significant role in its construction) that India was to become known to the Europeans in the colonial times. Europeans no longer saw India merely as an exotic and bizarre land but a kind of living museum of the European past. More importantly, such thinking established an enduring structural relationship between India and the West. Notwithstanding the variations in the content of the literature produced on India during the colonial era, one message comes out strikingly:
Europe is progressive and changing, whereas India is static and stagnant. It was this crude dualism which enabled the colonialists to look at India as a kind of living fossil bed of the European past (see also Cohn 1997: 78-79).

It has been argued that the colonial rulers tried to legitimise their presence in India by designating the village community as the basis of colonial policy. That is, the colonial construction of village was embedded in the principle of territoriality which formed the basis of colonial organisation of power. By making village all-important, they could frequently claim to restore a pristine institution that had fallen from grace by the tyranny of the native despotic rulers. This also imparts to the British the credit for having brought to fore a tradition which was unknown to Indians themselves. In this sense, colonialism as a form of knowledge has shaped much of the modern history of colonised places and peoples. It went to amass knowledge to enable itself 'to classify, categorise, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled' (Cohn 1997: 5).

Inden (1990) gives an ideological explanation for the new preoccupation with the village as the basic formation of Indian society. He argues that the Orientalist perspective that gained currency during the nineteenth century placed European modernity in a hierarchical relationship with Asiatic tradition. Seen thus,

The constitution of India as a land of villages was also due to the efforts of the British to deconstitute the Indian state. As they were composing their discourses on India's villages, they were displacing a complex polity with an 'ancient' India that they could appropriate as an external appendage of a 'modern' Britain. The essence of the ancient was the division of societies into self-contained, inwardly turned communities consisting of co-operative communal agents. The essence of the modern was the unification of societies consisting of outwardly turned, competitive individuals. Just as the modern succeeded the ancient in time, so the modern would dominate the ancient in space (Inden 1990: 132).

The primacy of the Orientalist perspective has definitely been an offshoot of colonialism. Dirks (in his foreword to Cohn 1997: ix-xii) has argued that
colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it. In certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. In this view, colonialism was also, nay primarily, a cultural project of control. For him, the historical anthropology of the colonial state must not be separated from the historical anthropology of the modern nation-state in general, as there was a range of institutional contexts in which colonial knowledge and colonial power were implicated. Indeed, what Dirks calls ‘the epistemological violence of the British rule’ has left its imprint on the categories of contemporary thinking.

Clearly, India constituted a vast field on which the British could impose their own version of history. And in their versions, India was a land of oriental despotism, and it has been historically steeped in decay, degeneration and chaos. Nonetheless, there were enduring and unchanging institutions, such as village community, in India at the local level. This fitted well with their notion of unilinear history clearly organised into developmental stages. Thus, India’s unchanging institutions based on family, caste and the village communities were construed as empirical indicators of the presence or absence of progress. In other words, Indian village was seen in the light of general concerns animating Western historiography. Certain universal features constructed as markers of progress (the presence of private property in land, for instance) were vainly looked for in the historic constitution of the village. It was this empirical quest for the markers of progress or (the lack thereof) which made India and Europe appear as braided concerns, and which, in turn, also signals the entry of Indian village into the domain of European social theory. The next chapter considers some of these issues in greater details.
Some of the scholars assert that the discourse on the Indian village under the colonial rule was not fashioned exclusively in the form of revenue and settlement reports. They point toward the vernacular literature - innumerable short stories, novels and other genres - which contains accounts of the Indian village in all its richness. Sadly, so far professional sociologists or historians have barely tapped this literature on the village, which started pouring from the end of the nineteenth century. For example, Lal Behari Dey's *Bengal Peasant Life* (1906), a description of his native village in the Burdwan district, is frequently cited. Also, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had composed a tract - *Bangadesher Krishak* (Peasant in Bengal) - around the same time as Maine was constructing his theory of the Indian village (see Inden 1990: 151; Breman 1997: 63). For the use of vernacular literature for social scientific analysis, see Ray (1983) and Pandey (2003).

In the West, studies of the village were primarily carried out by historians under the influence of the German historical school. This was so because, except for a handful of survivals, the village community was a purely historical phenomenon there. On the contrary, in India, village being an omnipresent reality was studied initially by revenue officials as part of assessing and collecting land revenue. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the East and the West, the historians and the revenue administrators, literally met so far as the study of village community is concerned. This brief interaction was made possible thanks to the growing popularity of evolutionism and the comparative method. The convergence of these two 'insisted on the essential identity of the defunct English village community and the living Indian village, separate in time and space, but co-existent in the same phase of social evolution' (Dewey 1972: 291).

This has been a noteworthy contribution of the historically inclined social/cultural anthropologists. It should be noted that village community is currently the provenance of the anthropologists so much so that it has aroused vociferous protests over the 'annexation of Indian anthropology by the village community' (for example, Dumont and Pocock 1957b: 23-42; Saberwal 1972). The longevity of the debate over the appropriateness of the village as the unit of sociological analysis shows how firmly it has been placed in sociological/anthropological imagination of India. The dominance of the anthropologists, however, is a recent phenomenon. As Dewey (1972: 291, footnote 1) observes, 'prior to the post-war anthropological boom, the village community was the plaything of historians and administrators'.

Some scholars argue that the institutional and economic inputs of modernity (read British rule) were too feeble to blow apart the structure of Indian society, and that the elastic, accommodating nature of the latter could contain them (See Frykenberg 1965). Nonetheless, the colonial construction of the Indian past lives on today in myriad ways. As Metcalf (1998: 114) notes, 'despite its inconsistencies and its subordination to the needs of colonial rule, the British ethnographic enterprise had far-reaching consequences, for these various categories informed the ways in which the British, and in time, the Indians themselves, conceived of the basic structures of their society'.

For example, Mukherjee (1996: 67-68) notes,

What is perhaps more important is to remember that the British administrator-scholars were not an isolated group; they were involved in the political conflicts
of the time and their theories about India and her history had a definite political slant...it is not possible to isolate their theories about Indian history and society from their administrative positions and political ideas.

6 It should be noted, in passing, that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the term statistical did not imply, as it does today, the collection, aggregation, and presentation of numerical data; rather, it implied the collection of information thought necessary and useful to the state (Cohn 1997: 80-81).

7 The British rule here includes the rule by the East India Company as well as by the Crown after 1858.

8 In much of the nineteenth-century literature, the Indian village has always been suffixed with community even when the primary interest lay in the mere settlement of revenue. We tend to believe that the ‘village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation’. This means that the ‘importance of the village within Indian civilisation is to be understood not simply in demographic but also in normative terms’ (Béteille 1980: 107-08).

Insofar as the West is concerned, not only that a degree of nostalgia is built into the very structure of the nineteenth-century sociology, but also a quest for community defines the very mood of that century. In their dislike of modernism the conservatives began the reaction by launching an all-out search for an idyllic past. The rediscovery of the community in the nineteenth-century historiography was part of this general resurrection of the communal and traditional past of Europe. The Europeans were bound to seek out for emphasis ‘those elements of the old regime on which modernism rested hardest’ and which they could hold up against the ‘egoism and avarice of the age’. Naturally, village community figured prominently in the scholarly debate along with guild, shire, manor, borough and other similar relics of Arcadian civilisation (see Nisbet 1970: 47-106).

9 Dumont (1970: 115) traces the genesis of the stereotyping of the village as a republican community to Munro’s Report from Anantapur (15 May 1806). Munro’s ideas were given wide circulation by Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wilks, who was Political Resident at the Court of Mysore, through his Historical Sketches of South of India in an attempt to trace the History of Mysore (1810). According to Wilks:

Every village, with its twelve Ayangadees as they are called, is a kind of little republic, with the Potali at the head of it; and India is a mass of such republics. The inhabitants, during war, look chiefly to their own Potali. They give themselves no trouble about the breaking up and division of kingdoms; while the village remains entire, they care not to what power it is transferred: wherever it goes the internal management remains unaltered; the Potali is still the collector and magistrate, and head farmer. From the age of Men [sic.] until this day the settlements have been made either with or through the Potaills (cited in Dumont 1970: 115-16).

Dumont believes that ‘this was the original to be endlessly copied and varied’ and ‘...on the whole, the cliché had been set’ (Ibid.). Subsequently, the Fifth Report merely amplifies Munro’s theme and his sweeping imagination.

10 The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of East India Company (28 July 1812). Originally published in London, it was reprinted in Calcutta with notes and introduction by Walter Kelly Firminger, Archdeacon of Calcutta in 1917, in three volumes. References are to the work edited by Firminger. This Report is essentially an assemblage of relevant policy papers and reports for the areas within the control of Bengal and Madras
presidencies. It formed the basis for understanding the agrarian policy during the first half of the nineteenth century, exactly as it was intended to do so by its two authors Samuel Davis and James Cumming. Bombay areas were deemed too recent an acquisition to have developed their own agrarian policy and, thus, do not figure much in the Report (see Stein 1989a: 2).

11 If the village was the basic unit of agrarian organisation, Munro’s proposal for revenue paid by individual cultivators on specific fields, that is, ryotwari, appears misconceived in the first place. According to Stein (1983: 45), Munro rhetorically dissolved the paradox in the following complex way: For Munro, the village was an autonomous political, economic, and moral universe. Indian kings had generally recognised this character of the village in the past and supported it by making only moderate demands for some part of its production. Also, they did not disturb the age-old allocations of another part of village resources, that is, inams, to remunerate village officers and servants. This Indian chiefs and kings could have done as the ultimate ‘owners’ of the soil. Munro wrote in 1805: ‘that there was no landlord but the sovereign is evident from the form and tenor of all grants of land’. However, Munro transforms corporate village membership into individual membership by the metaphoric equivalence of the ruler and the landlord. This is not original with Munro, but his usage promoted its currency in India. It also altered the idea of ‘raiyat’ who is changed from being a part of a corporate village body into an equivalent of tenant, thereby generating the transcultural metaphor or analogy - Indian sovereign or East India Company to landlord and raiyat to individualised tenant. In this way, both the corporate village and the individual peasant cultivator were preserved as bulwarks against the imposition of the Bengal zamindari settlement while at the same time maintaining the purportedly direct historical relationship between cultivator ‘tenant’ and government ‘landlord’. 12

In the literature on colonial India, it has been customary to distinguish between two groups of administrators: Orientalists and Anglicists. Orientalists were in favour of governing India as per its own customs and traditions, whereas Anglicists looked at native traditions with utmost contempt and advocated the application of English principles of governance to India. As the empire gained in confidence, the eulogisation of the lost greatness of India was replaced by the contempt for and critique of its present. The transition from Sir William Jones (1746-1794) to James Mill (1773-1836) is symptomatic of this (see also Inden 1986: 116-17). As Stokes (1978: 29) remarks,

in the early decade of the nineteenth century the onset of the Evangelical-Utilitarian philistinism together with the emergence of the philosophy of economic development and modernisation transformed the Enlightenment’s admiration of Oriental society into contempt, and the preservationist mentality of men like Warren Hastings gave place to the censorious prophets of Victorian improvement.

13 ‘Utilitarianism’ was the name given to a set of social and ethical principles formulated by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, and developed subsequently by the latter’s son, John Stuart Mill. For a classic study of utilitarianism, see Stokes (1959), and for its recent treatment, see Mehta (1999).

Report from Anantapur (1806) with much style and eloquence. In any case, as Dewey (1972: 296) writes, 'the description of the village community submitted by Metcalfe ... was not his alone: it was the product of several hands, of a tradition already old. But it evolved no further: Metcalfe's eloquence encased it like a fly in amber'.

15 F. W. Ellis, as the Collector of Madras, was intent on settling the revenue on the basis of village rather than individual peasant, and had a running debate with Munro on this issue.

16 One has to exercise utmost caution in applying labels such as 'conservatives' or 'radicals' in the context of one's attitude to the village community. It is generally true that the proponents of the laissez-faire were critical of the village community, and the critics of the laissez-faire were the ideologues of the village community. But, this was so when an advocacy of the laissez-faire itself was seen as a radical political act in England. Seen thus, the advocates of the village community were real conservatives. Once, utilitarianism or laissez-faire became the established governing norm in England, one could see the change of labels among conservatives and radicals. In the changed situation, the utilitarians or the former radicals became the conservatives and the defenders of the status quo. Those who were branded conservatives earlier became new radicals.

However, in the Indian context, proponents of laissez-faire remained radical and those of the village community remained conservative. Curiously enough, the common attitude to the village community united the social radicals in England and the conservatives in India. Conversely, the criticisms of the village community bound the political radicals in India and the conservatives in Britain. Thus, the village community caused much transformation of conservatives into radicals and vice versa depending on whether one talked in terms of metropolitan politics (that is, England) or that of the colony (that is, India). For an extended treatment of this semantic confusion, see Dewey (1972: 293-300).

17 'Social cohesion and economic growth: around these two desiderata attitudes to the village community polarised. Men whose primary concern was the avoidance of social anomie idealised the village community; those who were preoccupied by the problem of economic growth deplored the inhibitions the village community imposed on individual enterprise' (Dewey 1972: 295).

18 There were different forms of what Cohn terms 'investigative modalities' which the British devised and employed to further their imperial interests: 'An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes and encyclopedias' (Cohn 1997: 5). He identifies: 1. The historiographic modality, 2. The observational/travel modality, 3. The survey modality 4. The enumerative modality 5. The museological modality, and 6. The surveillance modality. They are important as some of these modalities were transformed into sciences such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law or cartography (Ibid.: 5-11). Further, 'these modalities and their outcomes can be seen as establishing a discursive formation, defining an epistemological space, creating a discourse and had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects' (Ibid.: 21). Also, sociology would not have been possible without its grounding in the outcomes of such British investigative modalities.