CHAPTER 3

THE INDIAN VILLAGE AND WESTERN SOCIAL THEORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

While continuing our consideration of the colonial construction of village, in this chapter, we shall explore the ways in which the idea of the Indian village came to inform the intellectual currents of the British society itself. Stokes (1959), Guha (1963) and, more recently, Metcalf (1998) and Mehta (1999) have convincingly shown that British rule in India was not a disconnected, separate and isolated fragment of English history. Colonial rule over India has, in fact, held a mirror up to the Great Britain reflecting the English character and mind. Ideas regarding India have been enmeshed with political and social doctrines of the day and many of the ideational battles in England were waged on the Indian question and rested upon Indian experience. Thus, it was no one-way traffic where current of ideas prevalent in England unilaterally found practical expression in Indian policy. India’s influence on the British outlook has also been substantial, and it has played a formative role in English history throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century. To underline the ways in which the British modes of thinking were implicated in India, in the instance of Indian village, is to reiterate that colonialism was not just about the colonisers any more (Nandy 1983). Also, it invites us to a theoretical framework where the ideas of the colonisers and the colonised can be seen as belonging to a unitary field of analysis.

Maine and the Discovery of the Aryan Village

From the early decades of nineteenth century, village community has embodied ‘a remarkable interaction between Western and Indian minds and data’ (Dumont
1970: 112). In fact, it had never ceased to be a 'shuttlecock to radical and conservative battledores', mostly administrators and revenue officials (Dewey 1972: 295). However, it was Sir Henry Sumner Maine (1822-88), along with Karl Marx, who should be credited with drawing the Indian village into the mainstream of English thought. The continuing debate over the historical primacy of the village community in India turned out to be decisive impetus of academic elucidation of village in general social theory. Towards the end of the century, the debate initiated by Maine led to 'encyclopaedic labours and muddled thinking' of Baden-Powell (1841-1901) (Stokes 1978: 4). In a way, with Baden-Powell the discussion surrounding the Indian village concludes (see Stokes 1978; see also Parasher 1992). Of late all these works have been criticised for their lack of solid historical foundation and clinching empirical evidence. Nonetheless, for sociologists, they remain standard authorities even now, and very often they form the point of departure for contemporary scholarship.

According to Maine (1861: 272-77, 1871: 103-30), India had a curious relationship with Europe. In his Rede Lecture on 'The Effects of Observation of India on Modern European Thought' at Cambridge in 1875 (Maine 1876: 205-39), he convincingly argued that India shared with Europe a 'whole world' of Aryan institutions, customs, laws and beliefs. India was thus part of that very family of mankind to which the Europeans belonged. Yet those Aryan institutions had been arrested in India at an early stage of development. As a consequence, unlike civilized Europe, India remained at the level of 'barbarism' despite its intimate connections with Europe of the yore. So India and Europe were fundamentally implicated with each other in a common origin yet paradoxically different. In this
sense, he extended what Orientalist scholarship since the days of William Jones had revealed.²

For Maine, societies were different and history had shaped the path each had followed. He reasoned that India's ancient institutions, linked to those of Europe by their common Aryan origin, became the germs out of which the social and political systems of modern Europe had emerged. Seen thus, Indian institutions were not merely curious anachronisms but contained in themselves the making of the successive phases of one ongoing process of development. However, in order to justify making inferences from India's present to England's past, Maine had inevitably to assume that India had had no history since the time of the early Aryan invasions. In effect, as he gave India with one hand a history linked to that of England, with the other he took it away. The dichotomy between India's static society and England's progress ultimately overwhelmed any sense of parallel development that he could have argued otherwise. In short, even for Maine, notwithstanding his assumption of a common racial origin and a common institutional ancestry for the Aryan peoples of Europe and India, similarity was necessarily subordinated to difference (see Stokes 1959; Burrow 1966; see also Metcalfe 1998).

Central to Maine's analysis alike of India's similarity and its difference was his conception of the village community. By Maine's time the notion of the village community had already acquired an extended history both in India and in Europe. Several currents fused. German Romantics sought their national origins in the Teutonic forests. Victorian liberals too concerned of the Saxon village community as the training ground for all subsequent self-government. They were busy discerning the origins of Britain's distinctive freedoms and argued that there is a
continuity from the Saxon freeman down to the parliamentary system of their own era (Nisbet 1967; Dewey 1972; Metcalf 1998).

At the level of practice, Maine was in favour of curbing the movement which was endeavouring to precipitate Indian society from status to contract at one bound; in his theory of the Indian village he remained imprisoned to the growth of evolutionary thought which had characterised his age. He described India’s brotherhood villages as marking out the earliest phase of an evolutionary process whose end point was to be found in contemporary England. He went on to pronounce India’s present village communities to be identical with the ancient European systems of enjoyment and tillage. Like Metcalfe’s vision of the village republic, Maine’s theory also had little place for the state or for caste. Thus, for Maine, the institution of village embodied that which at once intimately linked and yet separated India and Europe.

The fact that Maine had a unilinear scheme of evolution for the village community and that he suppressed inconsistencies in his own data have frequently been pointed out. What mattered to him was, in the end, not India but Europe. We should note that, for Maine, village was subsumed under the history of property regimes. His principal objective was always to explain Europe’s historical development in a way that inextricably connected civilisation, progress and private property rights. He looked at India’s village as a corporate body having common ownership of soil. This meant that this village has not progressed beyond the infancy of the civilisation. Logically, Maine treated them as survivals from the Indo-European past and evocative of Roman gens, for co-ownership of soil marked the infancy of law and civilisation. This is not to say that he had contempt for them. Rather, as an organised society, the village community ‘... besides providing
for the management of the common fund, it seldom fails to provide, by a complete
set of functionaries, for internal government, for police, for the administration of
justice, for the apportionment of taxes and public duties' (1861: 274).

To Maine, simple forms of the village are joint brotherhoods. Also, he sees
village communities as democratic and egalitarian in the political sense. His
preoccupation with community as an independent institution was largely
responsible for his neglect of the state in relation to the village. And, finally, he
always confused between the co-shares of the soil and the village population as a
whole despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Since Maine believed that the
movement of all progressive societies had been a movement from status to
contract, village community presented itself as a primitive social organisation to
him. It was primitive because it was characterised by the primitive form of
property, that is, land was held in common. Thus, in Maine's line of reasoning,
village community and collective property were seen as inseparable. After all,
ancient law did not recognise the individual. It knew only of groups and the typical
property-owning groups in olden times were the village community. By virtue of
equating village community with the communal ownership of land, Maine could
add a sharp edge to his thesis that the historical movement of property in land has
been a movement from collective to individual forms. At any rate, Maine's theory
of the village did not arise from any intrinsic interest in the history of India as such,
but was inspired by the assumption that a local system could be found in the Orient
similar to that which had existed in Europe's distant past. His analysis of the
development of legal traditions in the East and the West should be seen against the
background of the evolutionary theory that had such pre-eminence in the late
nineteenth century. Thus, while being placed firmly in the evolutionary framework
of the day village community entered the *domaine propre* of western social theory.

**Marx and the Quintessential Asiatic Village**

Maine had a predecessor in Karl Marx, for whom social stagnation was the hallmark of the peasant community. Marx's discussion of the Asiatic mode of production too betrays an evolutionary reading of Indian history (see Avineri 1969; Anderson 1974; Thorner 1980). His views on the village community appear primarily in his newspaper writings on the British rule in India, save a few passages in *Capital* (see Volume I: 350-52). Specifically, on the subject of the village community, Marx says,

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious, patriarchal and inoffensive social organisations disorganised and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilisations and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though, they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns with no events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan. We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste, and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never-changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalising worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow (in Feuer 1959: 68).

Despite his utter contempt, Marx did consider Indian village to be the heart of the Indian social system. This explains his rejoicing over the British rule in India. He believed that, while previous conquerors had effected no more than political change, England had brought about a social revolution by striking at the
heart of the social system - the Indian village: 'English interference ... dissolved these small semi-barbarian communities by blowing up their economic basis, and thus produced the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia' (in Avineri 1969: 93). For him, the laying of the material foundations of Western society in India/Asia was linked to the dissolution of the village. Since the village was the repository of all those characteristics that lay at the root of Asian stagnation, 'the work of regeneration' of India had to proceed 'through a heap of ruins', that is, the village communities (Ibid.: 112ff). Clearly, Marx was not for any shoring up of ancient traditions and institutions of India, least that of the village community:

... The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form...this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, an unchangeableness in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic states, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the storm-clouds of the political sky (cited in Anderson 1974: 338-39).

Marx held that pre-colonial India had no history: 'Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history is but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society' (in Avineri: 1969: 132). However, as Anderson has argued, Marx's explanation of the situation varied somewhat between his different writings (Anderson 1974: 473-83). For instance, in a famous passage in Capital his description of the Indian village is more sober and less contemptuous:

Those small and extremely ancient Indian communities...are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on an unalterable division of labour...The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity. Hence, production here is independent of that division of labour brought about, in Indian society as a whole, by means of the exchange of commodities. It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the state, into whose hands from time immemorial a
certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind (Marx 1954: 337).

So, for Marx, there was no separation of the cultivating householder from the village to which he belonged. Secondly, there was an absence of a division of labour in the village. That is to say, the village could manage within itself almost all the trades and crafts required for it to survive and reproduce itself. This was the major reason for the unchanging character of the Indian village. Finally, there was no notion of private property in land. Village was not separate from the land held in common. In effect, Marx reinforced the widely prevalent idea that in the Indian village, and in Asia in general, community is the real substance of which the individuals are mere accidents (see Inden 1990: 134-37).

The empirical inaccuracy of Marx’s description of the village has often been noted. Like Maine, he did not allow the then available empirical evidence to affect his theory: in his characterisation of Indian society as static, incapable of significant internal development, and devoid of history, he studiously overlooked Campbell’s account. The latter was a serious empirical challenge to Marx’s general theory on ground rent and the consequences of money rate (Fuller 1989: 53). According to Marx, the all-pervasive ‘rent in kind’ provided the basis of stationary social conditions in Asia (Avineri 1959: 796). Nonetheless, Marx’s idea of unchanging Asia and unchanging Indian village contains contradictions (see Avineri 1969; Anderson 1974: 484-95). They point out that Marx’s denial of the possibility of significant indigenous historical development in India only continued a strong European tradition. Anderson (1974: 481) writes, ‘the mature Marx of Capital itself thus remained substantially faithful to the classical European image of Asia which he had inherited from a long file of predecessors. He shows that the
image of a stagnant Asia cannot be justly sustained and the ‘Asiatic mode of production’, with which the idea of unchanging Asia is intimately linked, should ‘be given the decent burial it deserves’ (Ibid.: 548).

Thus, we find that in the writings of both Marx and Maine, village is treated as a pretext to expound and delineate their larger theoretical concerns. Whereas Maine’s study of the village community in India was guided by ‘a quest for our contemporary ancestor’, Marx was driven by a desire to unlock the secret of Asian stagnation.

Baden-Powell and the Precedence of the Ryotwari Village

Though Baden-Powell’s evolutionist-tainted classifications also suffered from Orientalist prejudice (see Breman 1997: 19-20), his contribution to the study of the Indian village is seminal (see Dewey 1972: 320-23; Inden 1990: 140-42). On the basis of the data contained in the mass of gazetteers and land-settlement reports of the 1870s and 1880s, he insisted that the Indian village community had never enshrined communal ownership of land and was not an Aryan institution. Also, there was no single ideal type of the Indian village. Highlighting the heterogeneous patterns of landholding, he posited that there was a bewildering variety of village communities in India. He grouped these villages in two broad categories: joint and several. In joint villages a strong joint body, probably descended from a single head or single family, hold superior titles to land and extract rent and services from the tenants. In the several villages individual cultivators own their landholdings separately and make no claim as the joint body to the estate of the village.

Following his conviction that India was fundamentally a Dravidian rather than an Aryan culture, Baden-Powell argued that the ryotwari (i.e. the several)
village had originated in a ‘tribal stage of society’. This type of village had come into existence much before the arrival of the Aryans in India. In fact, the ryotwari village was the result of the decay or dissolution of a pre-Aryan Dravidian clan system. He further believed that the several village was shaped by the social requirements of indigenous Dravidian and aboriginal peoples. More importantly, by asserting that the typical Indian village was a Dravidian institution, he reversed the sequential precedence of joint village over the several village, as Dravidians as an aboriginal people preceed Aryans in India. He asserts (1896: vi-vii):

The joint-village of India is not the universal or the most ancient form; and ...the common holding of land (where it is not the result of some special voluntary association) is traceable only among the superior tenures of the Hindu-Aryans and the later tribes who settled in Northern or Upper India...the so-called joint-village followed, and did not precede, the village of separate holdings, ...in those cases where it represents a section of a tribal or clan territory, it derives a rather elusive appearance of being held 'in common' from certain features of clan life and union; while in the very numerous cases in which it is a small estate connected with an individual founder, the joint-ownership depends solely on the existence of the ‘joint-family’ - i.e. on the law or custom of the joint-inheritance of a number of co-heirs in succession to an original founder or acquirer. How and when the joint inheritance and the joint-family came to be invented may be a difficult question; but if the idea of the joint-family is not primitive, nor found among all tribes or races, and is rather the special creation of the developed ‘Hindu’ law and custom as such, and if it is only found among other tribes after more or less contact Hindu-Aryans, then the joint-village cannot be demonstrably a primitive, still less a once universal, form of land-holding.

Furthermore, Baden-Powell broke with the idea that the village was inherently democratic or republican in its constitution. He challenged the notion of communal landholding in the village and disputed the assertion that all the members of the village were, at least in origin, members of a single clan or brotherhood. He writes (1896: 443):

Those who have hoped to see in the joint-village anything of a communistic or socialistic type will, I fear, be disappointed by a study of the real facts. By far the larger portion of the joint villages were in origin the result not of communism but of conquest; of tribal and caste superiority, and of family pride in the common descent from a house that once held sway in the country round. Not a few are the descendants of successful ‘farmers’, auction-purchasers, and land-speculators, who in common with others acknowledge the joint-family law...Even among the ‘democratic’ tribal settlements of Jats and the old free ‘cultivating fraternities’, the sentiment of equality is all within the brotherhood and not in the least for the
outside, their tenure is as much a ‘landlord’ tenure as any other form of joint-village community. For him, the village was in its essence a community of separate cultivating holders and other village functionaries organised as a small monarchy or oligarchy.

Thus, Baden-Powell advanced two interrelated arguments: (1) There are two types of village in India, and (2) the jointly held villages of the Aryans, taken to be the universally and essentially Indian type - the ideal-typical Indian village - is quite misleading. Contrary to what Marx and Maine had said, for Baden-Powell, joint villages were not the widely distributed type of the village, rather they were confined mostly to north India. What had been typical instead was the ryotwari (several) type of the village.

**Orientalist Discourse and the Production of Indian Village**

For Inden (1986: 401-02, 1990: 157-61), the variations advanced by writers such as Marx, Maine or Baden-Powell should not mislead us to assume that they were variously responding to the facts of the Indian village. Also, there is no point comparing their ‘theories’ or ‘explanations’ with the facts of Indian village/history. Rather, those facts themselves have been produced by an ‘episteme’, a way of knowing that implies a particular view of existence. Of necessity, any criticism of the ‘Orientalist discourse’, and of the accounts of India that it produced, should focus on the episteme of Indological discourse. Taking his critique to a higher methodological domain, Inden argues that the Indological episteme presupposes a representational view of knowledge. It assumes that true knowledge merely represents or mirrors a separate reality which the knower somehow transcends. It also allows the scholar to claim that his/her knowledge is natural and objective and not a matter for political debate. Likewise, it produces a hierarchic relationship between the knower and the known. It privileges the knowledge of the scientists
and experts (the knower) while subjugating the knowledges of the people. He questions the dualism of knowledge and reality. For him, knowledge both participates in the construction of reality and is itself not simply natural (in the sense of necessary or given). Rather, knowledge is, in large part, constructed. So, the claim that we can know the other as an external reality apart from the knowledge we have of it is highly questionable (Inden 1986: 412, 445).

While applying his methodological critique to the construction of the Indian village, Inden identifies a definitive determinism assumed to characterise the social system or structure of a village. By determinism he refers to the presupposition that there is a single, determinate, external reality 'out there' which human knowledge merely copies. Also, it operates on the assumption that the scholars have a privileged access to that reality. This determinism does not permit actors (villagers in our case) to exercise any choice with respect to how they constitute their communities.

Another feature of the Western conceptualisation of the Indian village is a certain essentialism. By essentialism Inden refers to the presupposition which takes the real world as consisting of essences. For the essentialists, human institutions, and even entire civilisations, are characterised by some essence in the sense of a stable determinate nature or structure. Furthermore, this essence is subject to human knowledge: Human knowledge can decipher a set of identifiable properties or characteristics constituting an essence in the same way, as it comprehends an objective reality. In other words, each culture or civilisation embodies a unitary essence. Depending on the nature of essence a civilisation exhibits it can be judged as ancient or modern. Since the essence of Indian civilisation is just the opposite of
that of the West, the village turns out to be the essential bedrock of traditional Indian society.

In epistemological terms, this essentialism pays little or no heed to the discourse of the villagers, and it is also antithetical to a theory that would restore action to the agents, as it sees 'particular acts not as constitutive of social reality, but merely as expressive of it or deriving from it' (Inden 1990: 159). Inden argues that the recent tendency has been to deny the traditionality of the Indian village in 'factual' terms without questioning the essentialism that lies behind the dichotomy of traditional and modern. Indian caste, transformed in contemporary scholarship into class, still remains the substantialised agent of India's villages. The state has been turned into its instrument and the village its victim (Ibid.: 156-58). According to him, economic self-sufficiency and internal homogeneity were, and still are, constitutive of the image of village community. As relations inside the village are projected to be organic and hierarchic, while those outside it antagonistic and anarchic, the idea of the village reinforces a dichotomy between 'the inner and the outer'. To quote his own words:

Most important however in this metaphysics of a textbook science that has produced our village India, is the presupposition of a dichotomy between village and state. So far as their characteristics are concerned village and state are mutually exclusive 'levels' of Indian civilisation, each the negation of the other. Probably the most important of the oppositions assumed to obtain between the two is one that makes the 'state' the level of peculiar politics (that of force, deceit and exploitation) which is absent from the village, and at the same time which makes the village that of an equally peculiar society and economy of communal conception which is absent from the state. The state, in other words, is essentially political while the village is essentially social and economic. Because they are so opposed, the one is a realm of aimless, non-developmental flux, while the other is a timeless, self-contained world of solidarity's and reciprocities. The former is, so to speak, the level of meaningless change in Indian civilisation. The latter is, on the contrary, the level of changeless meaning (Inden 1990: 159).

This juxtaposition of the Indian village and the state has had other functions as well. It was situated in a curious kind of societalism where Indian essence is
seen as reflected in different types of social groups as there are no individuals in India. This essence of all-pervasive societalism reduces the political, religious, and economic functions to the social. Naturally, the village takes precedence over kings, the state and the principle of secular power. In other words, since rational, scientific thoughts and institutions were not part of Indian civilisational essence, India could not have the modern state the way the West had. Europe had a modern state, as villages there had disappeared, while India was an ancient society, as the villages have survived there unimpaired since times immemorial. Impliedly, village was used to negate the historic value of the Indian state. Simultaneously, the colonial state was projected as a benefactor of the village as it is ushering into modernity. A complex polity could be downgraded into an ancient India and made an external appendage of a modern Britain. Thus, the idea of the traditional village society stabilises the modern state (see Inden 1990; see also Ludden 1999).

On the assumption of internal homogeneity of the village a picture of a cellular rural society gets constructed. Since this internal homogeneity of the village is to be found across the country, villages are everywhere in India pretty much the same. This line of argument not only naturalises the village but also conceals the fact that the construction of village was a state project within colonial modernity dating back to the early days of the British rule.

The Historiography of the Indian Village: A Brief Survey

It was said earlier that nineteenth-century debate on the nature of the Indian village community tentatively culminated with Baden-Powell. In fact, his The Land Systems of British India (1892) was the end of the debate concerning land-revenue systems and land-ownership patterns. The government no longer considered the indirect systems of rents consisting of contractual agreements with village leaders
as necessary and it reached down to the individuals configured by their caste and tribal status (see Prakash 1990: 387). Also, as said earlier, the centrality of the subject matter of most of the early writings on the village was variously subsumed under generalities such as land systems, revenue administration, property relations, agrarian policy, agrarian systems, agrarian structure, agrarian relations, agrarian production, ownership of land etc. Even the works of two most influential minds - Maine and Baden-Powell (whose work Inden (1986 and 1990) regards as 'hegemonic texts' on the Indian village) - were not the systemic accounts of the village as such. In tune with the tone and tenor of their times, they were primarily concerned with land systems and their usual corollaries.

In the next chapter we will see how those very aspects of the village which were singled out for the British administrator's praise became integuments for the nationalist historian. The tenacity of the village community was to become a point of departure for a generation of nationalist historians and ideologues. These nationalists succeeded in varying degree in projecting villages as self-governing democratic units. They never failed to appreciate that these characteristics were realised in a distant past. Though the glorious and harmonious past of the ideal village had been shattered under the weight of the colonial yoke, some of them fervently hoped and pleaded for a reconstitution of the nation on the basis of the pristine village communities. We need not detail here the ideal-typical characterisation of the nationalist village and how it attained a mythical status independent of the ground realities.

What is rather remarkable is the very persistence of the great myth of the Indian village in the work of historians. From Basham to Nilkanta Sastri one finds innumerable instances of the ostensibly pure, original Indian village of the past.
The reach and all-pervasiveness of this relatively new idea even in history textbooks have surprised many. One of the factors could be, as Parasher (1992: 25-27) believes, the inadequate historical research on the village. For her, the late arrival of the historians on the village scene partly explains the historians’ inability to counter some of the old arguments. So, not only were historians late but also ill equipped to produce objective accounts of the village.

Parasher laments the dearth of full-fledged historical studies on the village. However, she does not address the question whether the dearth of studies on the village itself was linked to the declining influence of the village as a theme in general. As, we have discussed (see supra), one of the reasons could be that Western scholars consigned village to the back seat once the debate became politically hot in Britain where there was an extensive conservative rebuttal to the radical annexation of the village as a tool of communistic propaganda.

Smith (1996: 67-74) advances a plausible explanation for the gradual erosion of the academic significance of the village community by the turn of the nineteenth century. With the transition in the British mode of governance, from rule-by-contract to rule-by-status, one notices a shift in administrative focus on the village. Administrators, if one carefully studies village records, moved from their earlier concern on the political relation of a village to the ruling power (that is, the state) to the social relations of individuals within a village. This meant that there was a broadening of the administrative scope from the mere mechanics of revenue extraction to the nature of land rights. The British started reaching out to subjects of their rule, the common villagers, notwithstanding the intermediaries of different hue between them and the village. They started recording all classes of non-cultivating groups in a village and their customary rights and duties. Each class
was identified by its caste; and against the name of each caste were listed the various services it was expected to provide together with details of how members were to be paid.

The change from *rule-by-contract* to *rule-by-status* required increasing emphasis on knowledge of the morphological character of Indian society, rather than on just the exercise of military and political power. *Rule-by-contract* operated as a pyramid, with the East India Company at the apex, and myriad ‘little republics’ of village communities at the base. *Rule-by-status*, by contrast, operated as a pyramid upside down, with the individual at the nadir, identified by his caste, and India, the sum of all castes at the top. Furthermore, the salience of census as an institution is largely responsible for the construction of a morphological view of India in terms of caste (Cohn 1987). By the end of the nineteenth century, India was already well into the process of being constructed as the sum of all castes, tribes and religions, rather than a disorderly collection of village republics with whom agreements for the collection of revenue had to be negotiated separately. Evidently, this inaugurates the broad trends of change in the official outlook, from the village republic to the caste, which as some scholars argue, turned out to be the all-knowing, all-embracing official view of India.

The substance of Smith’s argument is that, in due course, alternative views of Indian society emerged. The British view of the Indian society should not be treated as static. Their growing entanglement with the Indian village, primarily via revenue administration, made them forego the conception of Indian society as composed of numerous village communities. On the contrary, they came to see Indian society as dominated by a few well-known agricultural castes or tribes: ‘village communities were implicitly conceived ... no longer as autonomous little
republics, each with its own set of regulations, ... the village community was now represented as a community of proprietors exercising control over tenants (by law) and a miscellany of castes (by custom)' (Smith 1996: 77). Naturally, the idea of the village as a coparcenary body and its corporate strength was destabilised, and, in turn, one of the principal bases of the village metaphor crumbled under the weight of supposedly empirical village records.\footnote{2}

The dearth of scholarly historical studies on the village can be gauged from the fact that the works of Baden-Powell and Altekar are separated by more than a quarter of a century. Even after Altekar (1927) no single historical monograph on the village was produced for a long time. In fact, except Altekar, there is no major work on the history of the village community (outside the nationalist historiography) in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In the absence of any serious research on the Indian village, Parasher (1992) argues, it seemed almost natural for historians to incorporate images of the self-sufficient and self-governing villages into textbooks without questioning the apparently objective and authoritative statements of the earlier Orientalist discourses. Interestingly, Altekar echoes Metcalfe too faithfully (and Munro in its original ancestry, thus lending substance to Dumont’s claim). In the preface to his book, Altekar (1927: iii) writes, the importance of the history of the village communities in India can hardly be overstated; for the real history of India consists of the history of its village communities. Dynasties have come and dynasties have gone, but it is the village communities that have preserved intact the culture and tradition of old Bharatvarsha through several revolutions.

The incapability of ideologically transcending the Orientalist assumptions and the colonial presence led Altekar to perpetuate the very assumptions that he sought to reject and argue against. To be fair to him, Altekar did adjust his picture of the village on the basis of empirical research. He disputed the immutable nature
of the pre-colonial village community, pointing out that villages were incorporated into a more encompassing state framework. While questioning the closed character of the Indian village, he asserted that villages were not typified by democracy or equality. But, then he got stuck to the racial framework of the analysis of the Indian village (pioneered by Maine and followed by Baden-Powell). As Parasher (1992: 31) notes, ‘apart from, identifying an Aryan versus a Dravidian village, they [nationalist historians] were unable to recognise that there could be major variations in village life in time and space'. These historians were caught up in the identification of Aryan/Dravidian or Hindu/Muslim ideal types of the village. Moreover, they staunchly believed in the supposed virtues of the Indian village. In fact, the Village Panchayat Act of 1920 of the Bombay Legislative Council came for much praise from nationalist historians like Altekar, as they thought that it was ostensibly designed to revive those village institutions which had fallen prey to the historical vicissitudes. This respect for traditional village and its panchayat was kept intact in the face of census reports which suggested that the panchayat was no village forum. These reports had suggested that the village panchayats functioned exclusively as a caste council, particularly so in Bombay Presidency (see Mendelsohn 1993).

Marxist studies too moved away from the village per se as a unit of study. In his magisterial The Agrarian Systems of Mughal India, Habib (1999: 123-68) gives a partial treatment to the Indian village. He looks at the village as ‘a cohesive exploitative whole’ and argues that the growth of differentiation and the existence of an internal oligarchy need not be signs of the disruption and decline of the village community. At the same time, he cautions us that there was otherwise very
little in the village community to justify any vision of a communal life shared together. A sense of equality and democratic methods were certainly not there.

According to Habib, the bulk of the population of the ordinary village must have consisted of peasants, who were usually identified by their caste or *quam*. In fact, the predominance of a single peasant caste in particular villages, together with multiplicity of such castes in others, forms a pattern which may be said to be universal in India. In his view, the prevalence of *jajmani* relations, *pace* Wiser, was a result of the disappearance of the village community and the complete triumph of individual private land-ownership. In other words, only after the disappearance of the village community, the menials and artisans were possibly forced to seek the patronage only of individual families. Earlier, village servants and artisans were attached to the whole village and not merely to groups of client families. That is, servicing groups were provided with hereditary land allotment (*watan/miras*) from the village as a whole and not out of individual holdings. So, for Habib, the transition from *baluta* to *jajmani* encapsulates the changing nature of the village community.

Furthermore, the village in Mughal India (that is what Habib’s immediate concern is) stood in a dual position in its relationship with the outside world. A large amount of its produce had to be marketed outside to meet tax claims in cash. This brought village economy in the intricate web of the requirements and vicissitudes of commodity production. At the same time, the village had few claims upon outside agencies, least for the requisition of their needs. It meant that inhabitants’ needs had to be met very largely from within the village itself. Therefore, the village had to function more or less as a self-sufficient unit. Thus, ‘the twin circumstances dictated that a system of individual peasant production (a
seeming variant of Marx’s petty mode) with resultant differentiation should coexist with the organisation of the village as a “community”, a network of caste divisions and customary service or Barter relationships’ (Ibid.: 144-45).

Other Marxist historians like Kosambi and Sharma were mainly interested in delineating the contours of the Indian version of feudalism, and a study of the village was not axial to their historiographic concerns. While talking of the village their emphasis is on the relations between the landlords and the peasants. They argue that the Indian village became nearly self-sufficient by the end of the Gupta period. This was owing to the substantial decline in trade and urban life. In their view, the prior historical period had seen much efflorescence of trade and urban life. Once feudalism had lodged itself in India, for them, the village is turned into the site for class conflict between an exploited peasantry and an oppressive class of landlords. As Inden (1990: 156-57) asserts, ‘caste, transformed in their view into class, still remains the substantialized agent of India’s villages. The state has been turned into its instrument and the village its victim’.

Indian Village: Dialectics of Identity and Difference

All along we have argued that a proper assessment of the nineteenth-century debate on the Indian village community must pay a high degree of attention to its ideational/ideological context. Following Stokes (1959), we believe that the ideological warfare back in England contributed an important independent element to the British land revenue policy and to the transformation of Indian land tenures, and through them their conceptualisation of the Indian village. Indeed, British treatment of the village cannot be reduced entirely to a near-sighted pragmatism, as they were not ‘mere rationalisations of material interests or otiose justifications of simple expediency’ (Stokes 1978: 9). True, the British administrative system had
to fit itself to the frame of local society so that its ideas and practices converged with colonial requirements as well as native expectations, much of what they thought and did as the rulers of India was ideological in character. According to (Metcalf 1998), the ruling ideas of the British colonialism can be read as the products of two rival ideals - one of similarity and other of difference. Throughout the nineteenth century, as the British constructed their India, they had always to negotiate this disjuncture between an acknowledgement of similarity and an insistence upon difference.

As one seeks to collate the British construction of the Indian village, much has to be derived from such contending ideals. Theories devised to serve other purposes tell us a lot about the Indian village (as for instance, the zamindari/ryotwari debate). Put it differently, even if a theory of the Indian village was elaborated only to meet the needs of particular occasions like land revenue, survey and settlement regime, and even if it was a response to similar much pragmatism encountered through administrative practices, the role of overarching ideals cannot be gainsaid. The shifting meanings and emphases of these ideals laid down the intellectual foundations upon which the British constructed Indian village. In doing so, they drew upon a range of ideas which were current at that time, not least those which were prevalent in their home country. Indian institutions such as the village served only to reflect Europe’s gaze back upon itself. In the process, village presented itself as a fascinating topic being subject to a certain amalgam of scholarly curiosity and administrative convenience. It was this amalgam which informed the activities of many British scholars-administrators.
Admittedly, it calls for high degree of ingenuity to discern a coherent larger ideological system in the British practices of governance. Though their commitment to the production of knowledge about India was indisputable, they made little effort to construct explicitly an all-encompassing ideology for their imperial enterprise. This means that we should leave scope for empirical observation and experiential modes of understanding in British conceptions of India and its people. Without suggesting that the British vision of India was ever informed by a single coherent set of ideas, however, we can see an enduring tension between these two ideals as the British contemplated India. In a way, their shifting strategies of governance were shaped through the continual interplay of these ideals.

It is not difficult to tease out these ideals notwithstanding innumerable contradictions and inconsistencies which characterised the imperial enterprise in India. In a selective manner, the British conceived of the Indians as people like themselves. Logically, Indian institutions came to be seen as the historical mirror of the English institutions (recall Maine on village community). Since India was the historical underbelly of Europe, it could well be transformed into something resembling a facsimile of Europe (see Halbfass 1988). This perhaps explains the British zeal for creating Western institutions in India.

Not too infrequently, the British also believed that there were irreconcilable differences between themselves and the Indians. At times, they simultaneously accommodated both views in their thinking. Throughout the British rule, and particularly after 1857, the British administration was powerfully informed with the idea of India’s difference.
We have seen earlier pace Maine how the idea of India as a country somehow lost in time fuelled obsessive scholarly search for origins of British institutions. This implied a well-designed classification of India and Europe on the evolutionary scale. Like any classification, it always carried with it a presumption of hierarchy. It was through the establishment of this hierarchical structural relationship between India and the West that fundamental categories of analysis of Indian society were set in place. In this ideal-typical British conception India’s present was the British past. This holds true for both the contending groups: Romantics as well as Utilitarians. For example, Romantics, in their zeal to preserve the distinctive features of the village community, extrapolated on to India their own vision of the Indian past. In no way did the preservationist ideal simply involve the preservation of what existed but what British thought was India’s traditional past. No wonder then that in the process their vision of India drained its past of all content. Unlike the Romantics in Europe, for whom the past provided a rich texture of meaning, these romantic paternalists cast India in the timeless mould of the early Orientalists. Not surprisingly, the village, like so much else in India, became in British hands a living fossil (see Dewey 1972: 296-97).

It has been argued that the study of India also emanated from the larger scholarly enterprise which the Enlightenment entailed. The Victorians, as children of Enlightenment, sought a comprehensive and comprehensible knowledge of the world around them. They tried to fit everything that they saw into ordered hierarchies. For this task, of necessity, they banked on established categories of British thought. This perhaps explains why they could never look at the Indian village as merely an Indian village but always in relation to, say, a Teutonic village. Seen thus, the existence of Empire merely spurred on the British creation
of knowledge, by virtue of imparting a sense of urgency to the process. This is not to forget that the unequal power relationships of imperialism helped shape the categories within which that knowledge was constructed. How else could Europe claim to find its past in nineteenth-century India?

Subsequently, this combined strength of the Enlightenment’s quest for knowledge and the exigencies of the colonial governance made Victorians undertake a scientific enterprise of knowing India. As Metcalf (1998: 67) puts it aptly:

Victorian science and historicism fitted India thus necessarily into a hierarchical relationship with Europe and provided the firm footing of legitimacy which the British sought for their Raj. This sort of relationship with the world outside that would position their own progressive society at the leading edge of the development of civilisation (i.e., historicism) above all, through a theory of decline that complemented Britain’s own progress, the history of India was made to accommodate not just the existence of the Raj, but a course of historical development that made the imposition of the British rule its necessary culmination.

The fact remains that the strategies devised by the British to comprehend India were never simply intellectual exercises. The enterprise of knowledge was caught up in a conflict between the need to civilise India (a la Anglicists) and the opposing desire to preserve a traditional land (chez Romantics/Orientalists). Irrespective of the camps the British belonged to, they sought to fit their categories to the society they purported to describe. No doubt, many Indians such as Brahmin informants and assistants were collaborators in the shaping of the colonial ethnographic project. ‘Still under the Raj, the knowledge the British amassed cannot be separated from its role in the successful working of colonial rule. India was known in ways that would sustain a system of colonial authority, and through categories that made it fundamentally different from Europe (Ibid.: 113)."
A close look at the way the British treated Indian village, by implication, tells how the British delighted in eulogising those categories which would never announce India's similarity to Britain and thus might not threaten the colonial order. Indian village community came handy for them in their enterprise of creating a secure and pliable past in India for themselves as well as for India.¹⁵ Even when Indian village communities contained much of the ancestry of the Western institutions, India was linked to Europe only in antiquity. So, similarity there was, but only in the remote past. In this sense, the Indian village, despite being similar to the European village, could never threaten and dislodge the European ideal of difference. Whether India's history was described in terms of an inevitable fall from the grace (as by Orientalists) or of 'invincible immobility' (as by Anglicists), the outcome was the same: Indian village was not contemporaneous with the European one. It was different by virtue of being out and out traditional and was historically devoid of any endogenous progressive potential.

**Conclusion: Colonial Construction and the State-Village Relationship**

Effectively speaking, colonial construction of the village¹⁶ operated along three axes. First, it created a polarity between the ancient and the modern. The essence of ancient India was the division of society into self-contained inwardly-turned communities consisting of co-operative communal villagers. Moreover, it asserted that whereas the village was pre-eminent, the state was a nominal presence. When the state was not a nominal presence, it was rapacious, brutal and arbitrary in relation to the village. Very often, the Indian village was presented as opposed to the Indian state in its essence.

Second, the village was placed in relation to the modern colonial state. Not only was the Indian village opposed to the indigenous forms of state, but also was
the other of the modern colonial state being shaped in India. At the very same time the village was being brought into relation with the colonial state, it was also primordialised through a ‘denial of co-evalness’. This was a spectacular instance of temporal distancing whereby a hierarchy of societies along a scale of modernity was constructed (see Fabian 1983).

Lastly, the Indian village was placed in relation to a unitary developmental history. In the colonial construction, the village had performed a number of survival functions for Indians by insulating itself from the tumultuous ebb and flow of Indian history. In the process, it had stagnated albeit at a low level of political and technological development. Clearly, there was an urgent need to draw the village into the general spirit of the day, that is, development. And, since the colonial state was based on the accumulated wisdom of science and rationality, so the Utilitarians thought, it was the agency to ‘develop’ the village (see Constable 2000) and restore to it its lost glory which the Romantics had always celebrated.

What comes out strikingly from the colonial accounts (whether idealised or disdainful) of these scholar-administrators is that they tried to generalise on the basis of limited experience. Very often, villages found in one area, or amidst one particular community, were made to represent as the Indian village (for example, Metcalf raised the Jat villages of the region of Delhi to be the embodiment of the Indian village). Viewed thus, idealisation of the village necessarily entailed its reification. For the colonialists, village was not merely a crucial institution by virtue of its being the bedrock of land systems or land revenue administration, but was also associated with a characteristic approach to knowledge about Indian society. Underlining the epistemological and political significance of the village, Smith (1996: 2) goes to the extent of saying that ‘government intervention in
village affairs was clearly more basic a condition of British rule than the periodic enumeration and classification of its subjects'.

In the stereotyped colonial village time stood still. In no uncertain terms, this yearning for the past, and the consequent desire to keep the past alive in India, was reflective of a certain disenchantment with Victorian British civilisation itself. The ideal of the village community in particular resonated with nostalgia for 'the world we have lost'. In other words, the stereotyped village served the needs of the British Empire, Western social theory, as well as the English nostalgia for a romantic past.

Thus, the conception of a village community, though subject to some shifts in emphasis, cannot be dislodged from its place in the relations between the West and India, both in practical (i.e., political) and theoretical terms (Niranjana 1991: 374). It also betrays a particular European disposition towards the idea of community. In the Indian context, the then reigning Orientalist discourse saw community as something which the East has retained but the West has lost. Community was seen as a foundational category in the East, and a theoretical opposition between community and individual, or community and modern society was central to discourses on modern society that developed in Europe and which had a discernible impact on the way Indian village was conceptualised by European scholar-administrators (see Upadhya 2001: 35). By positing community as the hallmark of traditional society, the Indian village was relegated to the realm of an unchanging East which stood in sharp contrast to the individualism of modern society. These theoretical moves helped place Eastern and primitive societies outside of history as their collective conscience was based more on likeness and similarities - mechanical solidarity a la Durkheim (see Fabian 1983).
Thanks to the colonial construction of the ‘immemorial’ village community, even for Indian nationalists the village remained a compelling sign of ‘traditional’ India, which the colonial rule had sought to sustain for its own purposes. Eventually, Indian nationalists appropriated this idealised village, as they saw in these communities evidence for the antiquity of an indigenous concept of democracy, socialism, and much more that suited their ideological palate. The elements of traditional India constructed by the British had always fitted jarringly with the commitment to the ideals of progress and modernisation that the nationalists held. An incipient nation had to muddle its way through without unsettling the basic elements of ‘traditional’ India such as the village. In the following chapter, we will discuss the nationalist discourse on the Indian village. We will see, how, interestingly enough, the images of the village community crystallised in the initial encounter between the imperial master and the colonised subject have come to inform all the subsequent conceptualisations of the Indian village in a very decisive way.

Notes

1 Bhattacharya (1992: 113-49) is critical of Stokes and Guha for presenting a disproportionate focus on the ideas and experiences developed in Europe. For him, ... in order to understand colonial agrarian policies we have to go beyond an analysis of their intellectual roots in Europe. The influence of European idea was important, but the significance which certain ideas acquired and the forms in which the original ideas were accepted were defined by the circumstances which were not purely ideological while the ideas could at times provide a broad framework within which colonial policies could be formulated, particular policy measures were derived not from the logic of theoretical principles but from the imperatives a given situation and specific colonial needs (Ibid.: 148).

For the historians of this school, land revenue policy was very much an Indian subject and, more often than not, the local governments (of Presidencies) in consultation with the Governor-General decided on these issues. Stein (1992: 13) too believes that policies pertaining to agrarian matters were determined in India and, like territorial administration, was broadly left to Governors and Councils and Board of the provinces of British India. Still, it was subject to premises and prejudices then current in London and shared by the British officials (see Stokes 1959).
"Indeed, considering the general public indifference to Indian affairs, it is remarkable how many of the movements of English life tested their strength and fought their early battles upon the Indian question (Stokes 1959: xii).

See Maine (1861, 1871). Though Dumont (1970: 122-27) regards Maine as a second-hand writer, who failed to take advantage of his long stay in India to enrich his treatment of the village, the significance of his work can be gauged from the fact that J. S. Mill reviewed his Village Communities East and West. Besides, E. B. Tylor and L. H. Morgan, the founders of English and American anthropology respectively, extensively commented on his work and joined issue with him.

Stokes (1959: 33) believes that Maine did much to promote a less impassioned and prejudiced attitude towards Indian society, and to dispel the militant sense of superiority with which James Mill had infected the English educated mind.

For a trenchant critique from the perspective of these two issues, namely, caste and state, see Dumont (1970: 124-31). For a critique of Maine, as the arch progenitor of the 'hegemonic text' on the village, see Inden (1990: 137-40). Both these critiques are highly opinionated. For an early critique of Maine's theory of the village, see Baden-Powell (1896, 1899). In fact, Baden-Powell's work has been conceived as a counter to Maine's theory of the village. For a summary of comments and reviews of Maine's work by Mill, Morgan, and Tylor, see Dewey (1972: 306-16). For a balanced summary of Maine's views on the village community, see also Mukherjee (1996: 66-74).

However, the European career of the village community was to come to an end by the close of the nineteenth century. The heat generated by the Irish Land Act of 1882 made it abundantly clear that the agrarian reformers had captured Maine's theory for radical propaganda. For the reformers, the collective ownership in early village communities justified placing restrictions on private property in contemporary times. Fearful of communistic attacks on landed property, Maine and his followers (such as Seebohm, Vinogradoff, and Maitland) vigorously denied that joint property holding had ever existed in the early history of Europe. The resultant dissociation of the village community and collective property neutralised the theoretical significance of the former (see Dewey 1972: 316-28).

Incidentally, while formulating their views on the Indian village community, both Marx and Maine drew heavily on the work of George Campbell (1824-1892).

For a critique of Inden's critique, see Constable (2000: 1-37). On the basis of a careful analysis of the works of Mann and his collaborators, Constable finds it wanting to describe colonial knowledge only in terms of the construction of hegemonic 'essences' for the domination of India. For him, colonial knowledge about India was not determined solely by Western Orientalist categories. The colonial stereotypes of caste, race, and village were not unchallenged or uniformly hegemonic. He criticises the tendency (in the recent historiography of colonial knowledge in India, primarily Inden) to reduce colonial knowledge narrowly to a series of Indological mechanisms developed for the purpose of India's subjection. Its exclusive emphasis on the 'hegemonic' nature of Indological knowledge in terms of stereotypical 'essences' marginalises the existence of critical and contestory alternatives which challenged such Indological knowledge and rendered its acceptance in colonial society both 'un-uniform and less than hegemonic' (see also Chapter 5).

For a review of the historiography of the Indian village, see Parasher (1992).
For an extensive treatment of how caste came to be firmly itched in the colonial perception of Indian society and an interesting exploration of the emergence of ideas, experiences and practices giving rise to so-called 'caste-society', see Bayly (1999). Pant (1987) and Dirks (2001) exclusively deal with the colonial invention of caste. For our purpose, what is noteworthy is that the growing salience of caste as an essential marker of Indian society might have caused the gradual decline of interest in the Indian village community. Otherwise, how does one explain that a theme that was so prominent in the beginning decades of the nineteenth century does not attract much scholarly interest after Baden-Powell.

The village records must be seen as enabling the construction of an official version of knowledge about India in two ways. Firstly, preparation of the village records at the settlements provided the core information on which the Settlement Reports of districts were based; and the Settlement Reports formed the heart of the all India Series of District Gazetteers which above all represented published official knowledge (Smith 1996: 75). Village records and district reports, utilising a common set of social and legal categories, in some sense, complemented each other within the pyramidal structure of administration and law. On the one hand, village records moulded and preserved society along certain channels; on the other hand, the published reports invited participation in the process of rule, invited people to take on the categories and assumptions of official knowledge (Ibid.: 376).

For a brief critique of what Inden labels as 'Neo-Marxist history', see Inden (1990: 154-57). The summary of arguments presented in this paragraph is based on this.

In this sense, colonial representation of Indian society can be regarded as based on a relentless manufacturing of difference. To the extent that knowledge was power, to know was to rule. Knowing Indian society was also a way of creating a self-other dichotomy and distancing itself from the other. The other was to be known and represented through the self and, in turn, this representation of the other was to legitimate the rule of the self. Necessarily, the other had to be represented in terms favourable to the exercise of power. As a consequence, Indian past was flattened up and pigeonholed so as to make a coherent narrative that extended up to the present as part of the larger project of defining the essence of India's society. In other words, constructing the colonised in order to know it forms the core of the colonial relationship. It helps colonialists manufacture those ideologies which will mark the colonised with an inherent civilisational inferiority (see Inden 1986, 1990).

According to Cohn (1997: 78, 93), so far as the construction of India's past was concerned, the British Orientalist discourse revolved around India's double lack of history. First, it lacked the apparent sources such as documents, dateable records, chronicles and other materials out of which history is generally constructed. Secondly, as India had not progressed, the British was duty-bound to provide her a history. However, 'in the conceptual scheme which the British created to understand and to act in India ... they reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms' (Ibid.: 162).

It is possible to talk of the colonial construction of the village despite obvious differences among British administrators - the Romantics and the Utilitarians. These administrators do not, by and large, disagree over the content of the construction itself. They all agree that India is Europe's opposite, and the Indian
village is the European other. They differ in their evaluations of the Indian village. Those very features of the Indian village which the Utilitarians criticise and find worthless, the Romantics find praiseworthy. That is why Inden (1986: 429-32) labels the Romantics as 'the loyal opposition'.

17 For a detailed treatment of community as a unit idea of sociology, see Nisbet (1967).