CHAPTER 4
THE VILLAGE IN THE NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

This chapter looks at the place of the village in the nationalist imagination. It seeks to lay down the contours of the idea of the village as it came to inform different currents of nationalist thought and practice. The appropriation of the village in the nationalist discourse not only generated a new type of legitimacy for the emergent nationalist urban middle classes but also helped expand the ideational scope of the nation-in-the making. Moreover, in the nationalist rendering of the Indian past the village came to be projected as the civilisational essence and was seen as the primary repository of the real and authentic India. In no small measure were such constructions of the village the offshoots of the accumulated legacy of orientalist-colonial scholarship, though they came to be purveyed as the nationalist wisdom. Seen thus, this chapter endeavours to explore the nexus between the nationalist and colonialist constructions of the village.

This chapter also attempts to peep into the inherent fault-lines of the nationalist project. The competing political agendas of the different groups and forces had a significant impact on the varied idealisations/criticisms of the Indian village. Even otherwise, the notion of the village had always carried the inflections of various political ideologies that have been contested. In the Indian case this comes out most strikingly in the way Ambedkar contested Gandhian idealisation of the village. The Constituent Assembly debates provide a useful vantage point to evaluate and contextualise such inner dissonances of the nationalist agenda so far as the village is concerned. In the context of the aforesaid, this chapter intends to examine the changing content and conduct of the relationship between the nation and the village during the heydays of Indian nationalism.
Notwithstanding disagreements and differences in their ideological orientations or political agenda, the ‘village’ remained a core category through which most of the nationalist leaders conceptualised or thought of the ‘traditional’ Indian social life. True, unlike the colonial administrators, the nationalist leadership did not see the village simply as constituting the ‘basic unit’ of Indian civilisation. For most of them, the village represented the ‘real’ India, the nation that needed to be recovered, liberated and transformed. In this sense, they share an ideological affinity with the European romantics. As Inden (1986: 432) remarks:

Certainly the most important of the romantic and idealist writings from 1875 to Independence are those not of western scholars but of many of the Indian nationalists, including Gandhi and Nehru. Since the rulers of India by and large held views that converged with the positivist interpretations of Mill and Smith, it is no surprise to find that the nationalists found themselves keeping company with the members of the loyal opposition within intellectual circles.

Moreover, the nationalist conceptualisation of India’s pasts or traditional social order invariably also reflected their future visions or the alternative agenda they had for free India. The village remained a central category in their scheme of things. Not surprisingly, in the Constituent Assembly the question of whether the village or the individual should be the primary unit of Indian polity was debated passionately (see Jodhka 2002: 3343-44). For the nationalists, the village as reflective of the social formation of entire civilisation ‘was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation’ (Béteille 1980: 108).

Though the village was a central category in the nationalist imaginations, and there was a virtual agreement on the fact that it represented the core of the traditional social order of India, variations on both the merits of the traditional Indian village life and its place in the future India of their visions were clearly discernible. Yet, their views on village life were not mere observations of what was
happening on the ground. They reflect their visions of India's pasts and futures. In fact, none of them looked at the village as a concrete reality with regional variations and historical specificities having internal dynamics of change. Irrespective of their attitude and the overall ideological orientations towards it, the village for all of them was a civilisational entity. More importantly, they seemed to have assumed that the social structure of the village was similar everywhere in the subcontinent. Not only did these conceptualisations influence state policies for development and change in independent India, but also they have become part of the Indian common sense. In contemporary times, one sees nationalist constructs of the village making their presence felt in a variety of new social movements (Jodhka 2002: 3345). Thus, a comparative study of the internal disagreements or differences within the nationalist leadership on the subject, that is, the ways in which nationalist leadership approached the Indian village, will offer us a storehouse of insights regarding the trajectory of change in post-Independence rural India.

The Village in the Nation and the Nation in the Village

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the village along with becoming standardised object of administration also became the site of policy debate and political struggle between the colonial rulers and the nationalist intelligentsia. Earlier, it was embedded in the general theories of civilisational typologies. Nationalists no longer argued in terms of civilisational superiority-inferiority. Instead, they made the village the touchstone of the efficacy of colonial policies and the validity of the imperial claims of welfare and progress. Interestingly, as the image of the village community was rendered unfit for use as radical propaganda in Europe and it ceased to be a much-charged political figure there, In India, precisely at the same
time, it raised its head as an emotionally powerful political symbol. For the Indian nationalists, advocacy for the Indian village became the ultimate touchstone for patriotism.

In the nationalist literature, we find two principal themes concerning the village: the urgent need to preserve the basic constitution of the Indian village and the all-pervasive lament over the disintegration of the village under the colonial rule. These twin themes ignited many nationalist minds. The village came to serve the nationalist cause in many ways. As part of the rejection of colonialism, the nationalists had to have a fundamentally different view of the long historical trajectory that had preceded subjugation to the Europeans. In their nostalgia for a better past, nationalists naturally seemed inclined towards the myth of a simply-stratified, self-regulating and inward-looking village community. The inability of the village to transform itself historically was not seen as a negative characteristic a la Marx. Rather the immutability of the village became the sign of its confidence in its own strengths. By refusing to bow to the vicissitudes of political history, the village showed its inherent capacity for resistance. It was this resistance to get bogged down by the tumultuous historical currents which saved it from encroachment by the mighty colonisers. The point is that the same set of characteristics which were deemed to be responsible for the stagnation and immutability of the Indian village, came to be seen as the signs of its vitality and persistence by the nationalists. Nationalists could boast how even a mighty colonial rule could not dismantle this original nucleus of the Indian civilisation.

In the nationalist thinking, nationhood survived in the village, as the latter was left unaffected by foreign rule owning to the innate virtues of its constitution. Through a series of contrasting interpretations, the same village which was created
by the colonialists for altogether different purposes came to play an important role in the nationalist thought and practice. So profoundly did the image of a traditional India composed of a myriad of self-contained village republics stamp itself upon the consciousness of the educated populace of the nineteenth century that the influence of modernity was read invariably as a disintegrative one. Nationalists would ask: Had not the traditional forms of local self-government resting on the village panchayat and the village headman been rapidly drained of life by the judicial and administrative machinery of the modern state? Had not the monetisation of the land-revenue demand and the pressure for cash-cropping been followed by an invasion of the closed village economy by foreign manufactures with the resultant overthrow of traditional handicrafts? Had not the novel introduction of modern proprietary title deprived the peasant of his essential property in the soil, and in law or practice reduced him to a mere tenant or labourer of an outside purchaser, usually an urban moneylender (see Stokes 1978: 267)? The Indian nationalists of different hues and persuasions shared these simple, though powerful, ideas alike.

Colonial rule was held to be the prime culprit which led to the destruction and eventual disappearance of the social cohesion and harmony within the village (some British officers too held this view). Earlier, village had tried to protect its original identity through encapsulation as a traditionally oriented peasant community. With the introduction and gradual penetration of colonial land and revenue policies, the life based on mutual co-operation was disrupted, as supralocal institutions and agencies entered the scene in a big way. Under colonial duress the 'moral economy of the peasant' obtaining in the Indian village was replaced by the commercial market-oriented agricultural practices. As a consequence, the
commonality of interests gave way to conflict and competition. The nationalist rhetoric, and its articulation in the form of swadeshi ideology, is full of such thinking.

There were many factors behind the nationalist appropriation of the village (see Ludden 1999: 6-17). The urban middle-classes, which were championing the nationalist cause, needed the village to bolster their claims to be the true representatives of the Indian nation. By making the village the site of public policy debates, they could bridge the cultural gap between their own urbanity and the rural, rustic tradition of the village. It was immaterial to them whether they had known the village personally. What mattered was that the village occupied a pride of place in their public discussions and formulations. More than any direct experience of the village, nationalist debates should be looked at in terms of the evolution of national ideas about the historical substance of the nation and its future. Nationalist leaders shared with Europeans an urban identity, alienated from the village. But, at the same time, imperial ideology lumped all the natives together as native subjects whether they were from the village or not. In this scenario the growth of political nationality depended on the efforts to bring the village and the town together in the abstract opposition of 'Indian' and 'British'. This, in fact, was one of the important reasons for the success of the Indian national movement under the leadership of Gandhi. It enabled Indian nationalists to produce a distinctively national sense of village inside the British Empire.

In this sense, the entry of the village into the nationalist discourse also protected the cultural status of the urban middle classes by uniting them with the villagers in their opposition to colonialism. As a literate voice for illiterate people, a national intelligentsia could present village to the public and represent the rural
masses. As self-professed spokespersons of the imaginary nation they entrusted to themselves the task of translating (vernacular) village tradition into the (English) language of modernity. By virtue of their mediation, the nationalist voices succeeded in making the problems of the country into a critique of colonial policies and also to make village India a colonial problem. By holding colonialism responsible for the problems of village India, such as famines and poverty, low agricultural production and indebtedness, the nationalist intelligentsia not only challenged the colonial domination but also imparted a distinctively nationalist interpretation to the idea of the village. Educated leaders of the country could now speak for the country as a whole, the village included.

Subsequently, the village came to be represented in a set of iconic images in novels, short stories, plays, poetry and literature (see Bhalla and Bumke 1992; see also Pandey 2003). The literary portrayal of the Indian village entails a long tradition running from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay down to Munshi Premchand, from Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre to Kota Shivram Karanth. These literary portrayals are distinctly informed by the emergent nationalist overtones with all their characteristic fuzziness (see Kaviraj 1992).

By 1920s academic studies of the village came to be institutionalised, signalling the growing hold of the village over the national imagination (see Ranade 1926; Majmudar 1929; Shukla 1937). Using the broadly accepted theory of indigenous village India [stable and coherent], many economists sought to bolster village tradition while making villagers richer at the same time (see Mukherjee 1916, 1946). To make modernisation and development more authentically and effectively Indian appeared to be their prime concern. Simultaneously, the
intellectual articulation of the village community acquired a distinctively nationalist flavour in other genres of social scientific writings. In particular, nationalist historiography reinforced this tendency. Historians like Beni Prasad, H. C. Raychaudhury, K. P. Jayaswal, R. C. Majumdar, Radhakumud Mookerji, preferred to see the origin of the modern nation in the ancient India. Although their work did not concentrate on the village as such, their perspective indirectly helped soar up the myth of the ancient Indian village (see Sen 1973; see also Prakash 1990). These writings put forward an idea of the village which is symbolic of the patriotic struggles in British India. R. C. Dutt’s *Economic History of India* (1901-3), which became a major source of nationalist intellectual inspiration, is a case in point.

Even Jawaharlal Nehru (see 1981: 243-46) conceived of a traditional agrarian system of which collective or co-operative village formed the linchpin. He saw the co-operative spirit of the village as pre-figuring a socialist India. Gradually, the idea of a traditional village council gained ground, ignoring the fact that panchayat was no village forum but functioned exclusively in a segemetary capacity as a caste council (Inden 1990: 146-47).

Closely related to the idea of a harmonious village, nay, its very basis, *jajamani* system became a picture of reciprocity and equality which facilitated localised exchange of goods and services through a series of transactions among peasants, artisans and other service castes. This exemplary social distribution of local production was toasted as an unique feature of village India. Even though historians like Altekar (1927) and Kosambi (1954) questioned the closed character and immutable nature of pre-colonial village community while referring to its incorporation into a more encompassing state framework, modern attributes like
democracy and equality were bestowed on the Indian village unabashedly. Still the people did have a conception of the ideal village and tried to model reality to agree with that notion as far as possible (Béteille 1980: 110-11).

Thus, through a series of ideological and political moves, village was rendered as part of the nation. Since Independence, the village has also been a measure of national development. The nationalist ideas concerning the village have been expressed through latter-day efforts to resurrect village institutions, land reforms and rural development. Even after Independence, the Indian nationalists found it harder to resist sentimentality. The Gandhian School, in particular, saw a revival of the golden past in the Panchayati Raj institutions and other measures of village development in the post-colonial period. As Mendelsohn (1993: 807) rightly remarks, ‘the later nationalist Indian version of this [village] myth took the form of nostalgia for a supposed village panchayat or deliberative body in which everybody (or at least all men) took part’.

Gandhi’s Invocation of the Ideal Village

Not surprisingly, the myth of Indian village, which was put into place by colonial administrator-scholars, became central to the Indian nationalist’s view of the past (Dumont 1970; Cohn 1987, 1997). This myth found its most potent articulation in the politics of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The marked change in the social character of Indian national movement since the early 1920s shows Gandhi’s concern for the village and the villagers (Chandra 1979). Thereafter his entire political life was dedicated to charting out a detailed blueprint for an India, which would be a comity of self-reliant and largely politically autonomous villages. The translation of this myth as the basis for political action was called variously as ‘Gram Swaraj’, ‘Gramothtan’, and ‘Swavavlamban’. The ideas associated with
these terms, which are evocative of a golden past, when India was a land of pristine village communities, came to influence the process of the making of the Indian constitution as well.

The nationalist myth of the autonomous village community was also used for 'a plea for the reconstruction of Indian polity' by Jayaprakash Narayan (see Narayan 1956). This also shows how Gandhi’s ideas had entered into the political doctrines of post-Independence India. According to Narayan, 'the village community, expressing the two ideals of the voluntary limitation of wants and of unanimity in social and political views, should be preserved and strengthened as a fundamental element in the Indian political system' (cited in Bottomore 1972: 107). Much later, the emergence of the 'Bharat versus India' debate underlines new aspirations regarding the state-village relationship (see Sharad Joshi 1985, 1988). Thus, the idea of the village traverses a wide terrain from being synonymous with India itself, nay the authentic and real India, to a political camouflage for defending the interests of the rural bourgeoisie (Frankel 1978; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987; Bardhan 1996).

It would not be off the mark to argue that a heightened sense of nationalist zeal and fervour came to inform rural development in post-Independence India. Rural development was considered an essential item on the agenda of post-colonial nation-building. The fanfare associated with the launch of the Community Development Programme (CDP) is a case in point. More importantly, even though the Gandhian ideas could not form the bedrock of the Indian nation, their rhetorical sway was too strong to wither away, notwithstanding Ambedkar's forceful advocacy to the contrary (see Chatterjee 1986). Expectedly, Gandhi, the most illustrious nationalist, believed that under colonial domination the real India lived
on in the villages. In this traditional habitat he sought the key to establishing a modern society after independence. For him, national liberation was an empty rhetoric unless efforts were made to free the rural masses from conditions of poverty, literacy, disease and squalor. He desired a drastic transformation of village social life and substantial delegation of political power to villages. Gandhian programme of rural reconstruction was based on the conceptualisation of the village as a collectivity based on fundamental equality and co-operation. He believed that the members of the village had a tendency to be free from self-interest (see Gandhi 1956).

The leadership of the Congress movement, though already internally divided on the issue, repeatedly advocated a post-colonial development policy of village restoration in accordance with Gandhi’s principles. The subject came up for discussion in the Constituent Assembly where some members wanted the village to be the basic unit in the new social and political order. Ambedkar would have none of this and silenced his critics by pointing out that the Indian village was and always had been a den of iniquity and cesspool of factionalism. His intervention, however, did not go unheeded by the major part of his audience. In retrospect, it seems as if it were a moment when the idealism of the Gandhian vision yielded to the overwhelming realism of the Nehruvian-Ambedkarite vision. Although it did not get an unambiguous mandate, many members of the Constituent Assembly were sufficiently stirred by Gandhian ideas. For example, T. Prakasam participated in the debate by saying:

Sir, a very piquant situation was created by not making the village republic or the village unit as the real basis of the Constitution. It must be acknowledged on all hands that this is a construction which is begun at the top and which is going down to the bottom. What is suggested in this direction by Dr. Rajendra Prasad himself was that the structure must begin from the foundations and it must go up. That, Sir, is the constitution which the departed Mahatma Gandhi indicated and tried to work up for nearly thirty years (quoted in deSouza 2001: 2).
Evidently, village *swaraj* was the centrepiece of Gandhi’s vision of an independent India. In a broader sense, one sees three stages in Gandhi’s enunciation of the Indian village: (1) to establish the equivalence of the Indian civilisation with the West, which made him counterpoise the village to the city and presented the village life as a critique of and an alternative to the modern culture and civilisation, (2) to effectively articulate his concern with the actual existing villages and on ways and means of reforming them, and lastly, (3) to present the Indian village in an essentially futuristic framework as the potential core of an alternative civilisation (Jodhka 2002). For Gandhi, villager was to be the locus of genuine freedom. To be fair to Gandhi, his idealisation of the village also followed from his fundamental opposition to the parliamentary order. To quote Gandhi’s own words:

> My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation, and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theater, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply.... As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis....the government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat....here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom (Gandhi 1956: 5-6).

Admittedly, Gandhi sought equilibrium between city and village as he was convinced that a complete harmony between village and cities would form a basis for the eradication of such social evils as unemployment, class distinctions and the like. He was at his reiterative best when he said that real India was to be found not in her towns but in her ‘700,000 villages’. This is not to say that he was oblivious of the pathetic conditions prevalent in the villages of his times. Not only he agreed with Lionel Curtis’ description of an Indian village as ‘a collection of unsanitary
dwellings constructed in a dunghill’ but also offered to give more details about the neglect of villages.

What distinguishes Gandhi from his contemporary compatriots such as Nehru and Ambedkar was the conviction that the deplorable condition of the Indian village was the historical outcome of foreign rule and continuous neglect rather than an original state of affairs. His prophecy - ‘if the villages perish, India will perish too’ - was more to stress the great importance of the village in the Indian social system than idealise and romanticise the then-prevailing village life as alleged by many of his critics (Unnithan 1979: 80). Had Gandhi been an Arcadian romantic and a Luddite he would not have invested so much of his political energy for the reformation of the Indian villages. He held the view that prosperity of a permanent and fair nature can be secured through the proper development of villages. Thus, Gandhi ‘the born democrat’, wanted to build the structure of pure democracy ‘inch by inch’ directly from below. He wanted to make each village ‘a complete republic independent of its neighbours for vital wants, and yet interdependent or many others in which dependence is a necessity’. He wanted to present the model of real village government, to depict his ideal of a perfect democracy based upon individual freedom and at the same time upon collective and co-operative action. He was honest enough to admit that the conditions he prescribed apply to the ideal village of his conception, and that it might take a lifetime to model such a village. He asked any lover of true democracy and village life to take up such work and to start by being the village scavenger, spinner, watchman, medicine man and schoolmaster simultaneously. As he said ‘if all Indian villages could come up to the ideal, India would be free from most of its worries’ (Ibid.: 106-08).
However, Moore (1966: 374) argues that what Gandhi sought was a return to an idealised past. The Indian village community, purged of its more obviously degrading and repressive features, such as untouchability, provided him with a blueprint of that idealised past. For Moore, ‘fundamentally, the notion of village democracy is a piece of romantic Gandhian nostalgia that has no relevance to modern conditions. The pre-modern Indian village was probably as much of a petty tyranny as a petty republic; certainly the modern one is such’ (Ibid.: 394).

Be that as it may, after Independence, a certain nationalist genuflection to the Gandhian vision came to inform the introduction of CDP and various other measures of rural development. These programmes were meant to cater to Gandhian constituency even though their essential import was different. In a way the CDP is the official version of the Gandhian constructive programme, omitting some of its important provisions for social reform and with a considerable admixture of techniques gained from the rural extension service and industrialisation of the United States (Ibid.: 208). Rather than exploring the disjunction between government policies and Gandhian teachings, suffice it to say that Gandhi implanted the Indian village in the nationalist imagination in a way no other leader had done till then.

**Ambedkar’s Riposte**

For Ambedkar, Gandhi’s vision romanticised the village, though Gandhi had made it amply clear that the village he was talking about was a potentiality - ‘a village of my dreams’ - and not the existing village life. Ambedkar could not see this potential. For him, the village was the embodiment of repression and no freedom could emanate from there. He is vehement in his opposition to the Gandhi’s ideal village:
It is said that the new constitution should have been ...built upon village panchayats and District Panchayats...they just want India to contain so many village governments. The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic...I hold that the village republic have been the ruination of India. I am therefore surprised that those who condemn provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as the unit (cited in deSouza 2001: 6-7).

For Ambedkar, Indian village becomes a test case for probing the position of the ‘Untouchables’ under the Hindu social order for ‘the Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order’. He asserts (in Rodrigues 2002: 323):

One can see there [in the village] the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organisation to which he believes there is no parallel anywhere in the world. It is claimed to be a special contribution to the theory of social organisation for which India may well be proud of.

According to Ambedkar, Hindus, having an unflinching belief in the Indian village as an ideal piece of social organisation, were no less than fanatics. It is this fanaticism which have made them dominate the proceedings of the Indian Constituent Assembly by way of making angry speeches in support of the contention that the Indian village be made the base of the constitutional pyramid of autonomous administrative units with its own legislature, executive and judiciary. From the point of view of the Untouchables, there could not have been a greater calamity. He exclaims, ‘Thank God the Constituent Assembly did not adopt it. Nevertheless the Hindus persist in their belief that the Indian village is an ideal form of social organisation’ (Ibid.: 234).

Ambedkar takes pains to prove the novelty of the idea of the ideal village: ‘this belief of the Hindus is not ancestral belief, nor does it come from the ancient past’. He is convinced that such idealisations have been borrowed from Metcalfe. While quoting Metcalfe at length, he argues that, since the idealistic description of the Indian village came from the high-placed members of the governing class, the
Hindus felt flattered and adopted his view as a welcome compliment. It comes easily to subject people (Hindus in this case) to internalise the judgement of their masters and further degrade their own intelligence or understanding. By going whole hog in lapping the eulogies of the Indian village, Hindus have merely exhibited the weakness common to all subject people. Viewed thus, the idealistic view of the Indian village is the outcome of the joint efforts of the foreigners and the caste Hindus.

By contrast, Ambedkar posits that the Indian village is not a single social unit. In realistic terms, it consists of castes - *Touchables* and *Untouchables*. One has to distinguish between majority and minority members of the village. Furthermore, those living inside the village and the ones outside the village in separate quarters cannot be said to belong to the same unitary village. In short, economically strong and powerful community, poor and dependent one; ruling race and a subject race of hereditary bondsmen characterise the Indian village (*Ibid.*: 235, 325). He castigates the Indian village in an acerbic tone:

> In this [village] republic, there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a republic. If it is a republic of the Touchables, by the Touchables and for the Touchables. The republic is an Empire of the Hindus over the Untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables’ (*Ibid.*: 330-31).

What emerges from Ambedkar’s writings is his deep conviction that the Indian village is essentially a Hindu village. Very simply, it is a Hindu village because Untouchables have no rights: ‘they are there only to wait, serve and submit. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and ... because they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle’ (*Ibid.*: 331). Arguably, Ambedkar investigates the terms of associated life on which the *Touchables* and *Untouchables* live in an Indian village and reaches the conclusion
that in every village the Touchables have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow (Ibid.: 325).

Conclusion

Although Gandhian ideas of the village could not become part of dominant constitutional ethos, their very presence could not be ignored. The inclusion of the provision for village panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution and the implementation of CDP in the early 1950s on a massive scale can be seen as instances of nationalist genuflection to Gandhi. In terms of pragmatic policies and programmes, however, none of the aforementioned polar opposite points of view could ideologically hegemonise the statist treatment of the Indian village. In fact, it was Nehru's modernist vision of the village which became the source of the much of official policies and programmes of rural development initiated by the Government after independence, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s.

Interestingly, Nehru shared with Gandhi the notions of traditional Indian village having been a community in the past and, thus socially and politically, his ideas were pretty much the same as those of Gandhi. While sharing the same ground and the broad philosophical approach with Gandhi, Nehru, however, was quite clear in his approach that economically the village of future India could not be made self-sufficient. For him class divisions, backwardness and ignorance marked the actual existing villages and these ills were too serious to give rise to any question of the revival of the traditional village or necessitate any large-scale reconstruction along traditional lines (see also Jodhka 2002: 3350).
In general terms, Nehru’s and Gandhi’s views concerning the village could be placed on a continuum thanks to certain similarities of orientation and approach. Both of them looked at the village as a civilisational form, as a pan-Indian construct and as a denominator of nationhood. Both of them advocated the need, even urgency for change in actually existing village life. Also, they felt that forces of change are not going to be endogenous, that is, coming from within the village. As they understood the near impossibility of endogenous change, they advocated for outside agents for change. In the case of Gandhi, volunteers, the selfless rural reconstruction workers, personified the outside agency of change, while Nehru looked forward to and energised the all-powerful state to be the harbinger of change in village India. It was only Ambedkar who had no stakes in the village and thus did not trouble himself much about the future agencies of change in the Hindu-Indian village.

In Ambedkar, one finds the subaltern view on the Hindu village which has excluded ‘untouchables’ historically. To him, the very idea of the village is repulsive as it is impossible to escape from one’s caste identity whatsoever. Logically, revival, reconstruction, or for that matter development, is not an issue in Ambedkar’s conception of the village. Village is simply despicable and an immediate decline of this highly repressive social entity will only fasten the pace of decay of the Hindu social order. To the extent that village is the working plant of Hindu social order, any frontal attack on that order will necessarily mean an attack on the village and all that it stands for.

In the ultimate analysis, the Indian Constitution largely belonged to Ambedkar so far as his views on the village were concerned. However, this was not to be the total picture. Even now the echoes of the Gandhian nostalgia can be
heard in the theory and practice of Gandhians and neo-Gandhians. For the present purpose, what is to be noted is that, paradoxically, both Gandhi and Ambedkar seemed to base their understanding on an implicit acceptance of the Orientalist picture of self-sufficient and unchanging village. It matters less that they put their understanding to different uses. In other words, as Jodhka (Ibid.: 3352) argues, though orientalist/colonial categories provided them with conceptual resources, these categories could not completely limit and determine their politics and worldviews.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the nationalist euphoria hardly allowed the nationalists a critical space to question their own dependence on earlier colonial accounts which stressed cohesion and harmony. Nationalists had accepted the portrayals of the village contained in these accounts as an article of faith. The nationalists’s formulations of the village did not highlight their direct knowledge and experience of the village life. Rather, their sense of the village rested firmly on the official knowledge. In this sense, we can safely say that behind the intellectual appearance of the village in the nationalist accounts lay the basis of old orientalist and official knowledge constructed by the British.

At its most extreme, the nationalist position held that the pre-British village community, destroyed by the colonial administrative and economic frontiers, had not merely been integrated but had been a happy community. It was also asserted that it had been a republican community, and this assertion was usually interpreted to mean that it had been a democratic community (see also Mookerjee 1936).

Both colonial and nationalist constructions of the village were too ideologically charged and politically motivated to stoop down to the level of empirical enquiries. Yet, both the colonial scholar-administrators and the
nationalist intelligentsia rendered a great service to the future scholarly investigations of the village by placing it at the centre of many ideological and political debates of the day. As a consequence, they imparted to the village an intellectual salience which it did not have earlier. In a way, the colonial and nationalist renditions of the village paved the way for the later methodologically distinctive and fieldwork based studies of the village. In the following chapter we shall see how these studies of the village gave rise to a distinguishing tradition of 'village studies' in the hands of sociologists/social anthropologists. Never before village studies had acquired such professional respectability as evidenced in the context of growth and development of Indian sociology.