

THE MYTH OF 'SELF-SUFFICIENCY VILLAGE COMMUNITY'

The idea of the isolation and self-sufficiency of the Indian village was first propounded by Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1830, and since then it has had distinguished supporters, scholars as well as politicians. Sir Henry Maine and Karl Marx supported the idea, and in recent times, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers not only stated that Indian village was traditionally self-sufficient but also wanted a political programme that would restore to these villages their pristine self-sufficiency.

Since times immemorial Indian villages have tried to remain in isolation without depending on any outside agency for meeting their needs. Each village tried to produce what was needed for its requirements. It produced sufficient food not only for its use but also for the use of city people. It had a very well-set Panchayat system that settled all its disputes and thus village people did not like to knock on the doors of the court of law unless forced to do so. Similarly, the village folk also had their own priests who helped them in matters of worship. The head of the family was considered a friend, guide and philosopher. Arrangements also existed for educating the children in village temples. All social problems were also solved by the elders of the village without reference to any outside authority. Since the needs and requirements of the villages in those days were very limited, therefore, each and every village tried to be autonomous and self-sufficient. That is the reason that it has been said that each Indian is an autonomous republic in itself. This desire for autonomy is still there in our villages, and the people still do not like any outside interference. The policy of democratic decentralization and growth of Panchayati Raj institutions is an attempt to maintain the autonomy of our villages.

THE MYTH OF 'SELF-SUFFICIENCY VILLAGE COMMUNITY'

1. Part of the wider system: When an idea is over a hundred years old and is advocated by thinkers as diverse as Maine and Marx it nearly acquires the status of a dogma. Until recently, most writers in rural India look for granted the idea of village autonomy and autarky (self-sufficient). This has resulted in falsifying the true nature of the Indian village community and has provided a basis for revivalists and Utopians programmes of political action. It is only in the last twenty years or so that trained anthropologists and sociologists has made intensive studies of village communities in different parts of India and in some areas, they have been lucky enough to come across historical data. The picture that emerges from these data is that while roads, especially inter-village roads, were very poorly developed, while monetization of the rural economy was minimal, and while the locally dominant caste could lay down the law on many matters, the village was always a part of a wider economic, political and religious system. The appearance of isolation, autonomy and self-sufficiency was only an illusion.

2. Gandhian view of self-sufficient village economy: Gandhi is in favour of the self-sufficient village economy where the villages will be the independent economic units and is against the zamindari system and ownership of land should go to the actual tillers of the soil. He also viewed that there should be

communal ownership of land for balanced cultivation and the surplus land if any must be distributed to the rest of the village communities. India lives in villages. Naturally, the development of the country depends on the development of villages. All the goods and services necessary for the village members should be grown within the village.

3. Agnates dispersed: The members of an agnatic clan are often found dispersed in several villages. The members of a caste living in a village are bound by ties of kinship, marriage, economic obligations, and membership of caste panchayat with their caste-fellows in other villages. Even in South India where cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriage are preferred, the marriage field for a rural caste includes at least twenty to thirty villages. The field is much bigger in North India where relatives are not preferred for marriage. In addition, there is village exogamy and occasionally, village hypergamy. That is a man may not marry a girl of his own village, and he is not permitted to give his sister or daughter in marriage to the village from which he has obtained a wife. The marriage circle in the north includes two or three hundred villages. The fact that villages are usually multi-caste in the composition is pointed out as evidence of the self-sufficiency of villages. But even big villages, villages with over a thousand people, do not contain all the necessary castes whereas nearly two-thirds of India's villages have the strength of less than five hundred each.

4. Weekly markets: Weekly markets vary in a wide range. Some are patronized by people living in a few neighbouring villages while others are patronized by people spread over a wide area. Occasionally, there is also a certain amount of specialization in weekly markets: one market is famous for trade in cattle, another in sheep and poultry, a third in woollen blankets, and so on. Pilgrimages also take the villager beyond the village, and occasionally into a different language area. The periodical festival of a deity attracts devotees and others from nearby villages, and a bazaar springs up around the temples. The prospect of buying and selling at the festival is as strong an attraction as the religious one. There are fairs which are famous for the sale of cattle, and nowadays, cattle are moved by lorry a distance of two or three hundred miles to reach a fair. Such fairs occur all over the country and they reveal the fact that the peasant's social and economic universe is very much wider than his village.

5. The pattern of land ownership: The pattern of land-ownership, tenancy and labour frequently cuts across the village. The land which is included within the boundary of an official or administrative village is not always owned by those residents in it. Some of the lands are usually owned by people in neighbouring villages or towns. During the last hundred years or more, there has come into existence a class of absentee landowners, of people who reside in towns but own land in villages.

Again, members of a village are commonly found to own some land in neighbouring villages. Even tenants and labourers are occasionally found cultivating land lying in another village. In some irrigated areas where the density of population is high, it is not unknown for a tenant to cultivate land lying six or seven miles from where he is staying.

6.External trade: It is often assumed that trade and commerce did not touch villages in India. This assumption was perhaps true only of villages in the tribal areas. In the non-tribal areas, however, village economy has for a long time been integrated into varying degrees with regional, national and even international trade and commerce, in certain regions, such as Gujarat, and the Kerala and Coromandel coasts, there was a high degree of integration of village economy with the economy of the wider world.

7.Inter-regional trade: The inter-regional trade of the country also included the exchange of agricultural and forest produce. Gujarat, for instance, received a considerable quantity of wheat and opium from Malwa, rice and coconuts from the Konkan, sugar from Bengal, and groceries and drugs from the Himalayan regions. Within Gujarat itself, there was local specialization in the matter of crops, and there was much exchange of agricultural produce between different areas. While indigo and tobacco were grown in central Gujarat, sugarcane was grown in south Gujarat. The local produce was transported over land as well as water. There was a great deal of trade along the coast of Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch. Finally, even in the same locality villages supplied several consumption goods to towns.

8 .Dependence on towns: The villagers also depended upon towns for certain specialized services. Whenever they wanted to build a brick and mortar structure, whether it was a dwelling house, a well a hospice (dharmasala). A village meeting house (chavadi) or a pigeon-tower (chabuturi). They had to call in brick-layers and lime-workers from nearby towns. They also get their gold and silver ornaments made by a town smith. Though mud pots and pans were popular in the house, the few metal vessels which were in use, and the immense metal utensils for cooking community dinners, were bought and repaired in the town. The florist, the tailor, the washer-man, the vahivancha (genealogist) and the grain parcher (make or become dry through intense heat) were all to be found only in the towns and very large villages.

9.Political structure: The assumption that the Indian village community was not influenced by, and did not in turn influence, the wider political structure, is also facile. This assumption is a result of looking only at the top and not at the base of the political structure, a result of concentrating on the history of kings and generals and not of the people. At the village or slightly higher level, there was usually the dominant caste, the members of which owned a good deal of the available arable land, and also wielded political power in addition. Each such caste had a leader whose position was further strengthened by ties of kinship and affinity, and by his capacity to confer favours on his clients. Such chieftains stood at the base of the political pyramid everywhere in India. Above them was the Raja or king, the viceroy of an Emperor, and the Emperor himself, in ascending order of importance.

10.Rajputs and Muslims: Before the conquest of Gujarat by the Muslims in the thirteenth century, the Rajputs were a dominant caste over the entire region and Rajput chieftains were to be found everywhere. When the Muslim conquerors removed the sovereign king of Gujarat all the lower chieftains fought the Muslims. The decline in the power and wealth of the Rajputs was marked by the rise to the wealth of the Patidars (one who holds (owned) pieces of land called patis). They exported indigo, cotton and other agricultural commodities, and provided raw materials to urban artisans for the

manufacture of such articles as cotton textiles. In course of time, the Patidars acquired political power also. It is interesting to note that the Patidars were the principal supporters of the Marathas during the latter's campaign in Gujarat. And gradually the Patidars asserted their ritual superiority to Rajputs. At the present moment, Patidars do not accept water or cooked food from Rajputs.

11. Winds from without: We have already mentioned how pilgrimages and festivals took the villager to places beyond his own village. Apart from this, his religion embraced the whole of India, and at least the more knowledgeable villager had heard of Benaras, the Ganges and the Himalayas. The Brahmin priest was the visible representative of all-India or Sanskritic Hinduism. The institution of Harikatha in which the priest read and explained a religious story from the Ramayana or Mahabharata or Bhagavata to the villagers enabled the latter to absorb all-India Hinduism. This helped in the gradual Sanskritization of the lower castes and in making villagers everywhere an effective part of all-India Hinduism.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of a free India was self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, deriving their right livelihood from the products of their homesteads. Maximum economic and political power including the power to decide what could be imported into or exported from the village and the power of decision making would remain in the hands of the village assemblies.

People have lived for thousands of years in a relative synchronization with their surroundings: living in their villages, weaving homespun clothes, eating homegrown food, using homemade goods; caring for their animals, forests, and lands; celebrating the fertility of the soil with feasts; entertaining themselves with local arts, dance, folk music etc. Villagers have built temples, churches and mosques to nurture their faith. Self-sufficient villages will build India's economy much stronger.