www.historymarg.com

ISSN No. 0974-035X
An indexed refereed & peer-reviewed journal of higher education
Towards Excellence
UGC-HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT CENTRE
Gujarat University, Ahmedabad-380009, Gujarat, India

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GANDHI'S AND AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS ON THE INDIAN VILLAGE

Ms. Viraj Desai

Abstract

The present paper focuses on the idea of village in the Indian context and chronicles the various identical transformations it underwent during the colonial times and especially during the freedom movement of India. The paper studies how during the nationalist movement, the idea of village became central to the idea of 'India' in the attempt to critique the colonial regime and its means and ways. The paper studies the idea of village from the points of view of two of the most crucial figures of the Indian freedom struggle and the shapers of the independent India, Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. Mahatma Gandhi was a strong proponent of the idea that India could achieve *svaraj* or Independence only by focusing more and more on its rural life and areas and also candidly pointed out the shortcomings of the contemporary Indian villages for their betterment. The paper also provides an overview of the influence of Gandhi's views on village on Gujarati as well as Indian literature in English. On one hand where Gandhi's views of village were a democratic one, B. R. Ambedkar's views came from the viewpoint of the oppressed. For him, the village represented the microcosm of upper-caste dominance in which the Dalits had no place. Hence, the paper also throws lights on a different view of village than of Gandhi, one of the subaltern's view.

Keywords: M.K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Idea of Indian Village, Indian society and culture, Nationalist movement of India.

The Indian village, down the years, has been seen as a social and cultural emblem of Indian civilization. Villages are recognized as fundamental building blocks of the Indian society. They have been a useful medium for sociologists and anthropologists to study the 'authentic' Indian society and civilization. Apart from being a primary unit of Indian civilization, it is also a significant representative unit of the Indian society. The Indian village is often seen as a place where one can find the "real" India, a place from where one can know much about the people, the lives and the traditions of India. It is also regarded as a place of origin as well as preservation for Indian traditions and culture. According to one of India's most prominent sociologists, Andre Beteille,

> The village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilization. (Béteille 108)

After the First World War and during the Nationalist movement of India, the discontentment of people in far-off villages of India started becoming noticeable to the Government and the people of urban areas at large. Different kind of studies started being carried out to know the lifestyle, wants and needs of the rural population and especially, to know, as Prof. Ramkrishna Mukherjee observes, why were they obliged to lead a subhuman existence. However, the concentration of sociologists during the colonial era was more on studying the economics of the rural society rather than observing the village society as a whole. The British colonizers were basically interested in setting up more and more industries in India and thus in shaping the economy of India the way it was useful to them. It was then necessary for the British to study and understand the rural economy of India to shape the nation's economy according to their own advantage. As Slater observes,

> Villages came before towns, and even in the most industrial countries, where all economic questions tend to be studied from an urban point of view, it is well to be reminded that the economic life of a town or city cannot be understood without reference to the lands which send its food and raw materials and the villages from which it attracts young men and women. (Mukherjee 806)

In the attempt of studying India's rural economy in its minutest details, the cultural and social aspects of the rural life of India were getting ignored in the first half of the 20th century. It was only after 1950s that the sociologists and anthropologists started feeling that the village studies need to be conducted from other perspectives as well, such as *social* and *cultural*. As through that, a composite picture of rural society was yet to be exposed. (Mukherjee 811)

Villages have existed in India for a very long period of time. However, it was during the time of colonization that India emerged as 'a nation of villages'. Villages as singular, self-autonomous and backward units have always dominated the sociological national imagination in India. And last forty-fifty years have informed that the lineage of this stereotype goes back to colonial scholar administrators of late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Indian villages signified backwardness, stagnation, autonomy and stereotypes for the British. According to Surinder Jodhka, it helped them justify their rule over the subcontinent to their people back home in Britain. During the nationalist movement, many politicians and reformers were not only fighting to make India free from the British rule but also to present a country so diverse, both culturally and religiously, as 'a single cultural and political entity, on the basis of which they could imagine the nationhood of India.' (Jodhka 3345) And this is where the idea of putting the village in the center of their imagination helped him imagine the nationhood of India.

With the down the twentieth century, the ideas and practices of the rural came to dominate the social, economic and political discourses in India, shaping the contours of India's freedom struggle and critique of colonialism and modernity. India emerged as a nation

of villages. Yet, the singularity of the perspective on the village life has always been broken as we come face to face with differing visions about it in different thinkers and statesmen. The contrast and contestation in Gandhi and Ambedkar on their ideas of village can be explored in this history of village life in India. Jodhka observes further,

> Irrespective of their attitude and the overall orientation towards it, village for all of them was a civilizational entity. More importantly, they seemed to have assumed that the social structure of the village was similar everywhere in the subcontinent. (Jodhka 3345)

In the sociological and political history of India, no one has celebrated the village-life as Gandhi has. Mahatma Gandhi has said at many places, 'I have believed and repeated without number that the India is to be found not in its few cities but in its 7,00,000 villages.'. Especially, much of Gandhi's political philosophy and nationalistic aspirations revolved around the village. He believed that although it was true that the political freedom of India could only be achieved by overthrowing the British-rule, the real *swaraj* or home-rule could only be attained by reviving and restructuring the Indian civilization. As Anthony Parel notes,

> Such a civilization, Gandhi believes, would contribute towards the reduction of political violence, the moderation of greed, the increase of compassion, the advent of economic prosperity, and the spiritual integration of the individual. (Parel iii)

Although Gandhi did not belong to a village and spent most of his life in the city, most of his social and political philosophy, including that of *swaraj*, revolves around the idea of the village. Gandhi is said to have romanticized the idea of the village. For Gandhi, the village was not merely a piece of land where people lived but it was the very essence of Indian culture and civilization. He contradicted the urban civilization with the village civilization. He firmly believed that India as a nation must give preference to the village civilization, based on handicrafts in opposition to the city civilization, based on machinery and industrialization. He said so because for the times he lived in, industrialization was a novel concept and it was uncertain how much it had or could have contributed in the prosperity of the nation. As a politician he believed that one should not adapt a kind of civilization which was full of uncertainties. Cities, which themselves were a result of industrialization, were not only morally corrupt themselves but they were also polluting the moral of the rural people. Gandhi writes in *Young India* in 1927:

> Some of the villages are deserted for six or eight months during the year. Villagers go to Bombay, work under unhealthy and often immoral conditions, then return to their villages during the rainy season bringing with them corruption, drunkenness, and diseases. (M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 151)

Gandhi, however, found faults not only in the modern civilization but also in the contemporary rural society of India. Gandhi had realized that it was the British rule that had completely ruined the Indian village system. The changes that the colonial rule brought into

the lives of the Indians and that too rural Indians, made them more and more dependent on the outside world. He notes,

> The villager today is not even half so intelligent or resourceful as the villager of fifty years ago. For, whereas the former is reduced to a state of miserable dependence and idleness, the latter used his mind and body for all he needed and produced them at home. (M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 409)

Thus, he came up with an idea of every village as a republic. Down the years, critics have believed that his vision of the Indian village was a reformist one rather than a revivalist one. Gandhi's idea of *village swaraj*, through which he envisioned to reform the Indian village is best described in his own words below:

> My idea of village swaraj is that it is completely republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every villager's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth…Education will be compulsory upto the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability… To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results. (M. Gandhi 96–97)

Gandhi also supported the adaptation of village-centric society as he believed that the crores of people of India could never have a peaceful co-existence in cities. Thus, to establish non-violence, the adaptation of rural ways of living was inevitable.

Many critiques and questions have sprung up since Gandhi's ideologue of *village swaraj* appeared. The first critique was that the adaptation of the village-centric society would mean throwing the country back into past and not make it progress further. Industrialization and modernization symbolized progress and prosperity in the twentieth century and it even does in today's times. He defends his argument by saying that the progress of the cities in India was all due to the sufferings of the poor villagers of India and shuns away the argument that the prosperity of the Indian cities was due to the industrialization. He firmly believed that going back to the rural ways of living would make country prosper more and more. As he says,

> We may not be deceived by the wealth to be seen in the cities of India. It does not come from England or America. It comes from the blood of the poorest. There are said to be seven lakhs of villages in India. Some of them have simply been wiped out. No one has any records of those thousands who have died of starvation and disease in Bengal, Karnataka and elsewhere. The Government registers can give no idea of what the village folks are going through. But being a villager myself, I know the condition in the villages. I know village economics. I tell you that the pressure from the top crushes those at the bottom. All that is necessary is to get off their backs. (M. K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* 35–36)

Connected to this critique, another question which came up was that, in this nationalist imagination of Gandhi around the villages, what would happen to the already existing cities. To this question he replies that,

> Those living in cities and those working for the movement will have to develop village mentality and learn the art of living after the manner of villagers. (M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 3347)

Thus, Gandhi did not desire the city-dwellers to practically go back to the village but to adapt the ways of living of the villagers in the city itself. Gandhi believed that although the city-dwellers didn't need to cut down on their 'needs', they really needed to cut down on their 'greeds'. Where on the one had he believed that the living standards of villagers needed to be raised, on the other hand he was of a strong opinion that, 'the city standard has to undergo considerable revision'. (M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 320)

Other prominent argument that Gandhi puts forward is that alongwith the city-dwellers and the government, the villagers themselves have to work towards their betterment and upliftment. He wanted the villagers to come out of their orthodoxy and abandon untouchability. He also wanted the untouchables to change their ways of living radically. For example, he wanted them to,

> Observe common cleanliness, refrain from eating meat of dead animals and from drink, send their children to schools, remove untouchability among themselves and generally carry on such reforms from within as is possible. (M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 406)

Apart from being a political leader and a freedom fighter, 'the father of the nation', Gandhi, was also an environmentalist and could foresee the environmental issues which were to emerge almost after a century. That's why he wanted people to cut down on their greed as he believed, "the nature has enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not to satisfy anybody's greeds." Gandhi believed that in blindly running after modernization and industrialization, we have ruined the natural resources completely. The idea of 'going back to the village' also meant 'going back to the nature' according to Gandhi. Many environmentalists have considered Gandhi as a person with a deep ecological view of life.

Talking about Gandhi's influence on Literature, Gandhism emerged as a prominent influence on various languages of India such as Hindi, Gujarati and also English in the 20th century. Examples of such writings influenced by Gandhian philosophy in English are, Mulk Raj Anand's '*Untouchable*', '*Coolie*' and '*The Sword and The Sickle*', Raja Rao's '*Kanthapura*' and '*The Great Indian Way: The Life of Mahatma Gandhi'*, Kamla Markandaya's '*Some Inner Fury*', Abbas' '*Inquilab*', R. K. Narayan's '*Waiting for Mahatma*', Mukund Raj's '*Mahatma*' and Sudhir Kakar's '*Mira and the Mahatma'* . 'Each of these novelists has viewed Gandhi and Gandhism in his or her perspective and drawn individual conclusions. The various facets of Gandhism- truth, non-violence, non co-operation, ends and means, emancipation of women, eradication of untouchability and love

for the underdog- have all been interpreted and explored differently from their peculiar standpoint.' (Batra 40)

In Gujarati Literature, the time-span of 1915 to 1948 is known as the *Gandhiyuga* as in this period, many of the writers were influenced by Gandhi and that influence got remarkably reflected in the works of those writers. Some of the examples of the literary works influenced by Gandhi in which the plight of the rural people of the age gets reflected are, Snehrashmi's *'Matodu ane Tulsi' (novel)* and *'Vankaro nu Geet' (poem),* Jhaverchand Meghani's *'Yugvandana',* and various works of other poets such as Umashankar Joshi, Ramnarayan V. Pathak, Narsinhrao Divetia and prose-writers like Kishorlal Mashruwala, Swami Anand and Mahadev Desai. Gandhi had much sympathy for rural people of India as he felt that the progress taking place in the cities was at the cost of the life and happiness of the villagers. In the poem, *'Vankaro nu Geet',* this sympathy of Gandhi towards the untouchables and the rural people at large is expressed symbolically:

"આપણે અહીં આ ધૂળના ફાંકા- તેને રોજ ઉજાણી,
અમૃતના તેને સાગર છલકે, આપણે કાજ ન પાણી!"

Another prominent thinker of the age on the subject of the Indian village was Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. During the freedom movement, the popularity of B R Ambedkar was much less compared to Gandhi and Nehru. However, he is the only political leader whose popularity has only increased with time. Ambedkar's uniqueness and importance lie in his social background. Ambedkar's political and social ideologies have always reflected the sufferings and the plight of the most rejected sections of the society, the untouchables or the *Dalits*. Ambedkar had a first-hand experience of village-life and being a Dalit himself could see the contemporary village scenario from the point of view of a Dalit or an *oppressed*. 'Thus, in Ambedkar we find, what could be called, a dalitist view of village.' (Jodhka 3350)

Like Gandhi, Ambedkar also saw village as the representative of the Indian civilisation. However, he saw the Indian village in a slightly different manner as he saw it as a *upper-caste* civilisation. What is remarkable here is that he never saw the *Dalits* or the untouchables as a part of the *upper-caste* community. And that's why he saw the *upper-caste* civilisation as something hardly to get entitled as a *civilisation.* He notes,

> The Hindu civilisation, gauged in the light of these social products, could hardly be called civilisation. It is a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be Infamy. What else can be said of a civilisation which has produced a mass of people who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution? (Ambedkar 09)

Ambedkar and Gandhi saw the Indian village from two totally opposite perspectives. However, it was clear that for both of them that the social structure of the Village was similar all over India despite of its cultural and religious diversities. The village represented upper-caste society in a microcosm to Ambedkar. It was a place where he saw the traditions and rituals of the upper-caste society being performed religiously. Even though he often uses the

term 'Indian village', he made it very clear that he did not include the *Dalits* in it who didn't live in the village itself but outside of the village, in the 'ghetto'.

> The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a *cordon sanitaire* putting the impure people inside the barbed wire into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto. (Ambedkar 48)

For Ambedkar, the Indian village was clearly divided between two different and totally opposite sets of populations: the 'touchables' and the 'untouchables'. Where the 'touchables' were in majority and thus held the power whereas the 'untouchables' were in minority and were oppressed and subjugated. The 'touchables', holding all the powers, dominated and made the untouchables dependent on them economically. And from this dominance the socially unhealthy practice of bondsmen or the bonded labourers started. These bounded labourers, alongwith the other untouchables were not only dominated but also exploited and oppressed. They were supposed to accept the fixed wages or suffer violence. They, as Jodhka notes, lived a life that was full of humiliating experiences and dependency. The untouchables used to conduct their lives according to the rules that the majority community of the touchables imposed upon them.

Gandhi's idea of a village-republic, every village as a separate unit, was dangerous for the untouchables. Because, according to Ambedkar, Indian villages were full of narrow-mindedness, prejudices and communalism. Thus, Ambedkar was probably the biggest critic of Gandhi's idea of a village.

> His concern obviously emanated from the standpoint of the 'untouchables', for whom recognition of the village as a unit of legal structure of India would have been *a great calamity*. (Ambedkar and Moon 19)

For Ambedkar, the idea of 'village community' was far away from democracy. He was in complete opposition of romanticizing the 'Indian village'. He believed that the upper-class and political leaders did so because it projected them in a positive light.

Out of the two, only Ambedkar had the first-hand experience of the rural life in India. Gandhi and Ambedkar both belonged to the city and were educated abroad. Thus, their views on the Indian village were reflective rather than experiential to an extent and also futuristic in nature. Gandhi's vision of the village was 'reformist' in nature. He envisioned the Indian village as independent and self-sufficient, unpolluted by the evils of modernization and westernization. According to him, only through reforming the Indian village, India could attain *swaraj*. On the other hand, Ambedkar had a 'subaltern view' of village. His views were rebellious in nature as he spoke from the point of view of the oppressed and exploited class of the society. He never supported the so-called virtues of the traditional society and believed that the prosperity did not even lie in the reformation or reconstruction of the village. However contradictory views both of these leaders had about the future of the Indian village, one thing is clear that none of them was satisfied with its present state. And both of them agreed that the change couldn't be brought only from the within and outside factors needed to work

towards bringing the change to the contemporary village society. In a nutshell, it can be said that both Gandhi and Ambedkar saw the Village as the very essence of Indian civilisation, were disturbed by its contemporary state and had their own visions for the upliftment of the rural people. The only difference was that Gandhi was hopeful about the reformation of the villages whereas Ambedkar was not as he could not foresee the roots of untouchability getting uprooted in a village society.

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Ms. Viraj Desai
Research Scholar
Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat
E-mail: virajodesai93@gmail.com, (M) 9879549489