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The Country and the City in  
Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Ethnographies of Village India

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Anthropology

by

Camille Anne Frazier

2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Country and the City in  
Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Ethnographies of Village India

by

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Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Akhil Gupta, Chair

Ethnographic representations of the country and the city in India have changed drastically in the last hundred years. Pre-Independence ethnographies of India focused primarily on the village as a self-contained and self-sustaining unit, and connections to the outside world were left largely unexamined. With Indian Independence in 1947, the village became a site of rapid change, and the city began to figure as the source of that transformation. Urban-rural interactions became key to understanding the social, economic, and political transformations ethnographers were attempting to explain. In the tradition of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), this paper explores the emerging relationship between urban and rural India as witnessed through mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic representations of village India. In engaging these ethnographies both as sources of empirical evidence and particular forms of knowledge production, this paper gives historical context to conceptualizations of rural and urban India that continue to inform contemporary approaches to issues such as urbanization and rural development.

The thesis of Camille Anne Frazier is approved.

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Ethnographic representations of the country and the city in India have changed drastically in the last hundred years. Pre-Independence ethnographies of India focused primarily on the village as a self-contained and self-sustaining unit, and connections to the outside world were left largely unexamined. With Indian Independence in 1947, the village became a site of rapid change, and the city began to figure prominently as the source of that transformation. Urban-rural interactions became key to understanding the social, economic, and political transformations ethnographers were attempting to explain. In the tradition of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), this paper explores the emerging relationship between urban and rural India as witnessed through mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic representations of village India. In engaging these ethnographies both as sources of empirical evidence and particular forms of knowledge production, this paper gives historical context to conceptualizations of rural and urban India that continue to inform contemporary approaches to issues such as urbanization and rural development. Such an analysis suggests new ways of engaging the categories of urban and rural that do not presuppose their division but instead look to the ways in which they are produced through interaction.

This paper has two aims: 1) to illuminate the ethnographic history of village India, examining how ethnographers approached their subjects and how ethnographic representations and goals changed over time, and 2) to examine empirical evidence for the changing relationship between the country and the city in India, paying particular attention to land reforms, class transformations and changing forms of cultural, economic and political capital instrumental to this process. By attending to both the empirical and ethnographic history of the Indian village, this paper explores the relationship between urban and rural communities and their construction as categories, linking this process with transformative social, political and economic changes that

alter the very definitions of the country and the city.

These two areas of examination form the structure of this paper, and my analysis is categorized into two sections: ethnographic representations, and empirical observations of transformation. While I approach these subjects separately, I argue that the changes seen in ethnographic representations of the village are intimately connected with the empirical data, so that what ethnographers witnessed on-the-ground impacted how they understood and wrote about their subjects. It is thus impossible to extricate representations from lived experiences, but in treating these two elements of ethnographic texts separately, I am better able to examine the relationship between changing theoretical approaches to village India and lived realities of transformation.

In focusing my analysis on the political and economic changes that altered interactions between the village and the city, this paper discusses only two colonial-era ethnographies from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wiser and Wiser 1930, Wiser 1936) before moving to post-independence ethnographies through the 1960s. In making the methodological choice to focus my analysis on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies, my goal is to illuminate how drastic changes in political structures resulted in a changing economic and social relationship between the village and the city. Because of my methodological choice to focus on rural-urban relationships, some of the seminal ethnographies of India are missing from this analysis, or are treated only briefly, such as Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970).<sup>1</sup> This is because my task was to locate connections

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<sup>1</sup> Another body of work that is relevant to a discussion of ethnographic representations of the county and the city but is outside the scope of this paper is that of the “little tradition” and “Great Tradition,” first introduced by Robert Redfield and Milton Singer. According to Redfield and Singer (1954), the “Great Tradition” came into existence with urbanization, as the many “little traditions” of the villages were aggregated into a shared religious canon in the city. This approach to ordering the relationship between rural and urban India was largely missing from other mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers’ analyses of village India, perhaps because Singer’s research in India was focused on the city (Madras). For this reason, his analysis is more useful for understanding religious changes that occur within the city as the result of urbanization and changes in urban social structure, rather than how the religious practices of the city impacted those in the countryside.



between the city and the village in ethnographic representations of village India that were contemporary with the ethnographers' accounts, and those ethnographers who were unconcerned with describing 'modern' village India (Dumont explicitly states that he interested in "traditional social organization" and readers would find "nothing here immediately relevant" to contemporary Indian society [1970: xv]) were also largely unconcerned with describing the relationship between the country and the city. This is indicative in itself of an association between the city and the changing village and suggests that a discussion of urban-rural relationships is essential in understanding social, political, and economic transformations.

This analysis, while historical in outlook, is very much relevant to contemporary political, economic and social shifts that inform and reflect the changing relationship between urban and rural communities around the world. I see this project, then, as a conceptual rethinking of the categories of urban and rural, admitting their usefulness as categories, but focusing on the political, social and economic mechanisms that make these categories dynamic. Rather than taking the rural-urban dichotomy for granted, I examine how these categories are constructed through their opposition, arguing that one always operates within and through the other. Such an analysis complicates any singular understanding of the village or the city by illuminating the ways in which the conceptualizations of urban and rural operate in both spheres.

### **Theoretical approach**

This project is primarily guided by Raymond Williams' (1973) seminal work on literary representations of rural and urban England. *The Country and the City* laid the foundation for an analysis of the categories of urban and rural not as absolute, but as contingent upon economic and social structures that change over time, in turn transforming the relationship between the country and the city. Williams begins his analysis with a problem: is the English countryside

timeless, as literary representations would suggest? Or, rather, is the belief that the country remains unchanged until some contemporary event promises its demise a product of misrecognition of the constant transformations of rural life and the inherent interconnections between rural and urban livelihoods? These questions are very much relevant to ethnographies of India, not only in the past but also today. What is ‘traditional,’ what is disappearing and what is the source of this loss? These questions inform this paper and its analysis of both empirical evidence of transformation and ethnographic representations of that change.

Williams draws a strong distinction between the realities and representations of rural England. He centers this distinction on a Marxist analysis of labor relations, arguing that literary representations of the village often obscure the agricultural labor inherent in the making of rural landscapes. The pastoral landscape of literature is a retreat for a particular class of English gentlesfolk, and has very little to do with the countryside of the farmer (1973: 47). For Williams, idyllic representations of nature’s bounty ignore the laborers who manage these environments (32). Equally, representations of the city as the heart of exploitation and immorality ignore how this urban corruption is the result of the same social and economic structures that inform labor relations throughout the country. Picturing the country as idyllic and the city as corrupt incorrectly distinguishes between “processes of rural exploitation, which have been, in effect, diffused into a landscape, and the register of that exploitation, in the law courts, the money markets, the political power and the conspicuous expenditure of the city” (Williams 1973: 46). According to Williams, such representations were an attempt at maintaining stability in an unstable time of social and economic flux from peasantry to agrarian capitalism that transformed labor relations in the country and the city alike (1973: 45). The economic and social relations of the city cannot be separated from those of the rural countryside:

The greed and calculation, so easily isolated and condemned in the city, run back, quite clearly, to the country houses, with the fields and their laborers around them. And this is a double process. The exploitation of man and of nature, which takes place in the country, is realised and concentrated in the city. But also, the profits of other kinds of exploitation – the accumulating wealth of the merchant, the lawyer, the court favorite – come to penetrate the country, as if, but only as if, they were a new social phenomenon. (Williams 1973: 48-9)

The idyllic rural and corrupt urban ignores how the dominant social classes in the city are also those of the country, and vice versa. The “‘town and country’ fiction” thus serves “to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones,” thereby obscuring the detrimental effects of capitalism on social relations in both the city and the country (Williams 1973: 54).

Like *The Country and the City*, this paper is also rooted in an analysis of labor relations and economic transformations. This focus is in part due to the empirical evidence suggesting that economic shifts were the primary source of the changing relationship between the village and city, but also because I found that these ethnographers most often focused their analyses of change on economic systems. While reading these ethnographies closely and noting every mention of the city, I found that I was recording many more references to the city in discussions of the market and labor relations than in sections on religious traditions or marriage practices. This is not true across the board, of course, but this observation does point to ethnographic understandings of stability and instability that influence how the relationships between the country and the city are understood and represented. Even while economic relations with the city were most often represented as the primary source of change, these economic transformations reverberated through social and political relations. Thus, while my analysis deals largely with economic changes, I contend that markets cannot be separated from political and cultural aspects of social life, so that any analysis of land reform is also an analysis of political power and social value.

This approach must be contextualized within a long history of debate over the most “productive” relationship between the country and the city in postcolonial India. Akhil Gupta (1998) traces the conflicting understandings of “progress” and “modernity” that influenced how postcolonial India approached its cities and villages. The choice had to be made whether to focus state development programs on urban industrialization or rural agricultural production: “postcolonial discourses of development in India reflected a tension between ‘industry-first’ and ‘agriculture-first’ strategies” (Gupta 1998: 35). Despite influential figures like Gandhi, who was resolutely “anti-industrial” (Gupta 1998: 44), agriculture took a backseat to industry in the years following independence. In this sense, the nationalists did not represent a radical break from the colonial government’s approach to the countryside. As Gupta suggests, both groups considered industrialization to be the best path forward: “There was thus widespread agreement among both colonial officials and nationalists on two issues: the subordinate role to be played by agriculture in India’s progress, and the application of scientific knowledge and scientific methods to improve agricultural productivity” (Gupta 1998: 44-5). This approach has largely continued to this day, and understandings of ‘development’ rooted in industrial ‘progress’ have played and continue to play a large role in the relationship between the city and the village. This tension between industry and agriculture, while not expressed in this way, was an underlying factor in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic representations of village India. This history is therefore important to an analysis of the changing relationship between urban and rural India.

### **Ethnographic Representations of Village India**

Village India has long been the subject of ethnographic analysis. One of the most (in)famous and enduring accounts is that by British colonial official John Metcalf, published in 1832, which argues that India is made up of a series of “little republics” (Metcalf in Srinivas

1955: 23). This understanding of the village is reflected, if not referenced directly, in almost all of the ethnographies discussed in this paper. While colonial-era ethnographies mostly adhere to an understanding of the village as isolable and discrete, postcolonial ethnographies struggle to complicate and refute such a simplistic view of the Indian village. This largely maps onto the primary shift seen in ethnographic representations of the village following independence: from one of stability to one of intense change. Within the context of this larger shift, there are five main trends in colonial and postcolonial ethnographic representations of village India that map onto a chronological sequence. They are: 1) illuminating the independent village; 2) redefining the village to focus on interconnections and changes following independence; 3) practice-oriented approaches intended to have real-world applications in state decision-making; 4) focusing on changing economic conditions as indicative of changing social structures and caste relationships; and 5) a retelling of the historical relationship between the country and the city to dispel the myth of the independent village republic.

It is important to note that, in all of these approaches, the city is the source of change. While some accounts position villagers as resistant and others position rural communities as active agents in these processes of change, it is contact with the urban markets and changing economic relationships with the city that transform village India. My goal in discussing these various ethnographic approaches, then, is to argue that the village is defined by its relationship with the city. Whether the outside world is ignored completely or is represented as an essential factor in village life, it is the presence of absence of the city in ethnographies of village India that provides insight into how the city and the country were approached and represented.

### I. The economically independent village

William H. Wisner's *The Hindu Jajmani System: A Socioeconomic System Interrelating*

*Members of a Hindu Village Community in Services*, first published in 1936, was one of the first ethnographies to examine the interconnections between social and economic structures in village life (Cohn 1968: 22). For Wisner, an American missionary, the village was a self-sustaining economic unit composed of caste interdependencies that supported village cohesiveness and economic independence from the outside world. For this reason, what lies outside the singular village is largely absent from Wisner's work. Yet the city and its associated educational and employment opportunities do make an appearance, always as that which is alien to the village. For example, in Wisner's discussion of changing understandings of scholarship among Brahmans, he describes how "the child does not tend to accept the teachings of a local untrained religious teacher after having been taught by a trained secular teacher who comes in from the outside" (Wisner 1936: 18). Secularism is thus imported into the village from an outside source, and if we extend this argument further, using Wisner's treatment of a singular village as representative of all village India, secularism can only arise outside the village.

William and Charlotte Wisner's *Behind Mud Walls*, first published in 1930 and republished in 1960 and 1971 with updates, again positions the village as a unified whole. But in their later editions, the Wisners admit the rapid changes that were radically altering village life. Their 1971 publication lists a series of conversations with village men about their receptivity or resistance to change. Despite this attention to transformation, the Wisners argue that the social structures grounded in religious traditions and family values have remained the same:

Changes of the past ten years...have not been a threat to tradition with its strong roots sustaining life as is and as it has been. They have brought relief to many from the fear of hunger and from insecurity. And they have opened men's minds to the benefits of progress, preparing them for greater change to come. Gandhiji once said, "if the village perishes, India will perish. It will be no more India." Karimpur, an ordinary village of North India, will not perish while it is nourished by the best from its past and yet remains free to accept the best offered by the New. (Wisner & Wisner 1971: 273)

Even in times of intense transformation, the Wisers characterize the village as unified, internally-focused, and “tradition”-oriented. The survival of the village depends on the continued existence of “the best from its past.”

## II. The still unified but rapidly changing village

“Change” became the key word in post-independence ethnographies. Two collections published in 1955, *India's Villages* (Srinivas 1955) and *Village India* (Marriott 1955), were published with the goal of documenting village India in a time of immense transition. Many of the articles published in these two volumes struggle to balance the conflicting views that everything has changed and that much has stayed the same. Authors such as M. N. Srinivas and F. G. Bailey assert the continuing unity of the village, even while economic changes are altering social relationships. Srinivas begins by arguing that “the traditional mode of life still persists” in many villages (Srinivas 1955: 21), and he describes this “traditional mode of life” as one of “vertical” (intra-village) and “horizontal” (caste, inter-village) unity. While his article is focused on these forms of cohesion, he is admittedly writing at a time when such social relationships are increasingly tenuous. Thus, at the same time that he asserts that “the village is even today largely self-sufficient,” he goes on to say, “but now-a-days there is a need for goods made, or grown outside, the village...A self-sufficient economy is possible only if each sub-caste adheres to its traditional occupations” (Srinivas 1955: 29). With an increasingly educated youth who are “urban in their outlook,” the desire to fulfill one’s “traditional” occupation is dwindling (Srinivas 1955: 29).

Srinivas’ conclusion is best indicative of the tension felt between village India as ‘traditional’ and also transformed:

Enough evidence has been produced to indicate the kind of ties that bind together the members of the village community. These ties are strong and traditional. But the forces set in motion in the last hundred and fifty years have been such as to weaken them, and the arrival of Independence has marked a concentrated effort to snap these ties. What kind of village community will come to exist in the future, can only be a matter for speculation. (Srinivas 1955: 35)

This tension exists within other authors' analyses as well. For F.G. Bailey, the village is united through its "common background" and shared "economic life," as well as the "great multiplicity of ties between persons" (Bailey 1955: 128-9). Despite these ties, Bailey "do[es] not suggest that the village is a utopia of perfect integration. It is a village axiom that the poor are helpless against the rich" (1955: 130). The story he uses to illustrate such economic inequalities sheds light on what he means by "the rich." Bailey describes a wealthy upper-caste man living in the nearby city of Phulbani who, because he no longer resides in the village, has no accountability to the village community and thus is unscrupulous in his relationships with the villagers. As Bailey suggests,

the point is not only that this man is without a social conscience, but also that he has interests outside the village. Thus he is less dependent on his fellow villagers than are other men in Bisipāra. This suggests that the more the village becomes integrated in the larger economy, by the private enterprise of men like this, the less of a unity it becomes. (Bailey 1955: 130)

For Bailey as for Srinivas, changing economic relationships with the city undermine the village unity that is, for both authors, the defining element of village life.

In his edited volume, *Village India*, McKim Marriott (1955) is relatively unconcerned with change, instead asking whether the village has ever been an isolable unit. He settles upon an understanding of villages as "relative structural nexuses, as subsystems within greater systems, and as foci of individual identification within a greater field" (Marriott 1955: 191). Villages have not ever been isolable, and conflicts have always existed between and within villages, but still there is a "system" to be studied. Srinivas, Bailey, and Marriott, by each arguing that the village



is not isolable or static, but that it still functions as a unit, were working toward a reformulation of ethnographic practice in India that accounted for the transformations they witnessed all around them while allowing for continued unity.

### III. The village as the site of state development and the ethnographer as public servant

While the above collections are focused on identifying both change and continuity, they are still very much descriptive. The mid-century ethnographies of Indian sociologist S.C. Dube (1955, 1958) mark a change in ethnographic approaches to village India. Dube begins his analysis with the argument that the Indian village has always been dynamic: “we cannot regard the Indian village community as static, timeless and changeless. Time and the interplay of historical and sociological factors and forces have influenced the structure, organization and ethos of these communities in many significant ways” (Dube 1955: 3) Just as no village is static, “no village in India is completely autonomous and independent, for it is always one unit in a wider social system and is a part of an organized political society” (Dube 1955: 5). These depictions of the village as dynamic and part of a larger political society illuminate the disparities between the Wisers’ colonial-era representations of village India and Dube’s understanding of the newly independent nation’s past.

This approach to the village must then be understood in relation to Dube’s overall project: a chronicling of village life before it changes forever. He states,

in India, where ways of life and thought are changing very fast, we require a large number of such community studies, both in rural and urban areas, in the different cultural regions of the country. We owe it to posterity that we leave careful records of contemporary life and cultures. As it is, for their historical and cultural interest alone such studies are worth undertaking. But their importance is greater at the present juncture because the country is undergoing significant technological changes, and it is necessary for us to assess and evaluate their human implications. (Dube 1955: 12)

Dube's ethnography is thus a nationalist project of looking to the past to understand the present and make conclusions for the future of a newly independent nation-state. Dube positions himself as a contributor of knowledge about village India that will be useful in discovering how to design and implement rural development programs. His later publication, *India's Changing Villages* (first published in 1958), makes this claim explicit, and his relationship with the government is institutionalized through his participation as a researcher in the National Community Development Programme and his work with the Village Level Worker (VLW) program of the Community Development Project. These programs were designed to increase agricultural production and improve the living conditions of farmers in villages across India (Dube 1963: 19). Dube saw his own research as important to understanding how policy initiatives could be most effective in increasing the quality of life in rural areas. As Dube argues,

the programme was started with the assumption that, in general, 'village people are eager and ready to improve their way of life.' What they needed most, it was felt, was an opportunity to see what they could accomplish through their own efforts. They were reluctant to accept the new unless they were convinced that it was better than what they already had. It was therefore necessary to translate development ideology into the language and symbols of the people. This raised the question of relating planning to the *felt needs* of the people, and also that of evolving an agency that could understand the village mind and interpret the programme to the village people in a language which they could understand. (Dube 1963: 11, emphasis in original)

While Dube's stated goal is to become familiar with the wants and needs of villagers, this passage is clearly written from the perspective of an outsider. Among the list of qualities defining the "spirit and pattern" of the VLW program were: "to get down to the level of a villager, set an example by one's own way of living, get acquainted with him and be accepted as a friend," and "to help the villagers to make their own plans and do things for themselves. They should be made to feel that they are important" (Dube 1963: 22). While Dube argues that the village has never been static, his writing is evidence that changes to village life were being

understood and implemented by city-based, educated officials. The village becomes a space of state-initiated transformation that refutes the colonial-era ideal of the village as static, but for Dube as for previous ethnographers, the agents of change were outsiders.

Oscar Lewis' analysis of Rampur, a village outside Delhi, cannot be considered nationalist, but it is nonetheless invested in providing information on "those aspects of village life which would be germane to the problems facing the Community Development Projects and the Program Evaluation Organization (Lewis 1963: ix). In meeting this goal, Lewis and his team undertook an intensive survey of all aspects of life in Rampur. Like Dube, Lewis was interested in the "needs" of villagers. He concludes that apart from irrigation,

the greatest need is for more outside income. If India's new Five Year Plan should succeed in fostering industrial output and in creating new jobs on a large scale, overpopulated villages like Rampur might be relieved of land pressure...One difficulty at present is the slow development of industrialization and the scarcity of available jobs. The cities are already crowded with the unemployed. (Lewis 1963: 110)

For Lewis, then, both the problem and the solution are located in the shifting relationship between the city and the village. While he does not consider the village as isolable, he also argues that village life is the key to understanding Indian society in general:

Although I have traveled the length and breadth of India, visiting villages as well as cities and universities, and consulting with Indians in all walks of life, it was not until I had studied one village intensively that I began to learn something about Indian life. (Lewis 1963: viii)

Knowing well a singular village is the most effective means of understanding Indian ways of life.

#### IV. Village life as determined by larger economic and political transformations

T. Scarlett Epstein's (1962 and 1973) ethnographic comparisons of two villages show no signs of struggle between representations of the village as isolable or as part of a larger network. She argues that state-level development projects and urban-based economies have

unquestionably altered the social, political, and economic life of the villages under study. Her concern is thus not whether the village can be treated as a single site of analysis, but instead to use the village as a site for exploration of much larger processes. She describes two farms in the Mandya district of Mysore state (today Karnataka). She characterizes Wangala as “wet,” or irrigated, and Dalena as “dry.” These characterizations are based on the presence of a state-run irrigation development project that brought water to Wangala’s fields but, although it runs past Dalena farmers’ lands, is situated too far below the level of Dalena fields to serve the community (Epstein 1962: 197). It is this difference that, for Epstein, is the determining factor in contemporary village life. She argues,

before the advent of irrigation in the Mandya region the two villages were almost identical in all aspects of their economic and social life. Apart from irrigation, both villages have come under the impact of the same external stimuli, but the basic economic difference of wet and dry land has been responsible for the two villages assuming distinct roles in the regional economies. (Epstein 1962: 7)

I will return to Epstein’s analysis below in my consideration of the empirical evidence for the changing relationship between the city and the village, but for the time being, it is important to note that Epstein considers the villages under question to be wholly determined by outside forces that fundamentally alter economic systems within and outside the village. This is a very different approach to understanding village India than that of the hereditary, caste-based *jajmani* system.

In *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (first published in 1965), André Beteille argues that the village is a site of “intersection” for understanding larger processes:

The outside world enters into the life of the villager in a multitude of ways. What happens in the state capital and in other urban centres is often discussed with keen interest by the residents of Sripuram. The village, being situated in the delta of the Kaveri River, is particularly exposed to external forces. Thus, in studying the social life of the village it is extremely difficult to separate what is internal to it from what belongs to the milieu of which it is a part. The village, in fact, may be

viewed as a point at which social, economic, and political forces operating over a much wider field meet and intersect. (Béteille 1996: 2)

Rather than obscuring the connections between the individual village and its surroundings, Béteille argues that these interconnections are central to understanding village India. Especially when considering the distribution of power, “what happens within [Sripuram] is understood very inadequately if one ignores the broad political forces which operate in the region as a whole” (Béteille 1996) 174). Béteille’s approach to power as expressed through interactions between the village and outside forces differs greatly from previous ethnographers’ analyses of caste conflicts within the singular village.

#### V. The village as always and inherently connected with the city

While all of the postcolonial ethnographers discussed here were, to one extent or another, arguing against an understanding of the village as isolable, they all continued to represent connections with the city and the ensuing social, economic and political transformations as relatively new phenomena. Bernard Cohn rejects the idea that village connections with the city are new, instead arguing that the relationship between the city and the village has long characterized village life:

It has been a persistent argument of this essay that, in time, there has been a typical relationship between city and village in Indian civilization, that the two are organically linked by networks of direct relationship structurally and by a common culture and communications network. (Cohn 1971: 155)

These connections have consisted of feudal relations between urban kings and peasants, cities as centers of religious and secular scholarship, and the countryside as agricultural producer for the metropolis. In all of these relationships, urban-rural connections are characterized by a “common culture and communication network,” suggesting that a division between the city as “Western” and the country as distinctly “Indian” ignores the longstanding cultural commonalities between

the two. For Cohn, the country and the city have always been linked, and their interconnection cannot therefore stand as the singular justification for the immense changes taking place in the postcolonial nation.

This is not to say that for Cohn, the quality of the relationship between the village and the city has remained constant. As Cohn argues, the intensified commodification of Indian agricultural goods following the establishment of colonial plantation agriculture for export had a large impact on rural communities. At the same time, however, he is quick to qualify this statement, saying,

in some respects Indian agriculture has always had a commercial component. India has supported cities and craft production, courts and luxury consumption, as well as a range of service functions, both rural and urban, all requiring food and raw materials derived from agriculture. (Cohn 1971: 81)

Thus, while changing economic systems focused on global markets will have an effect on the relationships between the country, the city, the nation and the world, this relationships is rooted in a long history of interconnection.

Ethnographic representations of village India shifted greatly in the years following independence. From the village as a self-sustaining economic unit to an understanding of the village and the city as always and inherently connected, ethnographic approaches to the urban-rural relationship were intimately linked with ethnographers' understandings of their village subjects. Even while these texts were resolutely "village ethnographies," the relationship with the city (and whether this relationship is emphasized or ignored) is as productive a site for understanding ethnographers' conceptions of the village and their descriptions of village life. The presence or absence of relationships between the city and the country are very much tied up in ethnographic ways of seeing and knowledge production. At the same time, however, I argue that these representations are useful for understanding empirical changes to village communities

following independence. The following section explores how ethnographic representations reflect the changing relationships on-the-ground that altered how villagers and urban residents understood themselves and one another.

### **Empirical Evidence of Transformation**

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers focused their analyses on the city as the source of change. I argue that this attention to urban markets and state-level changes to political and economic policies, while it represented a continuation of previous associations between the city and the forces of change, was rooted in a historical process of postcolonial transformation. As urban, cash-based markets came to figure more and more prominently in village life, ethnographers began to assert the interconnections between the village and the outside world, suggesting that changing ethnographic representations of the relationship between the Indian city and the country reflected concrete transformations in lived experiences of this relationship over time. Because this change was anchored in economic transitions, I adopt Raymond William's theoretical approach to understanding social relationships between the country and the city in terms of economic transformations and changing labor relations. I use this analysis of economic structures to understand how markets reflect and inform social and political relationships between the country and the city.

This section focuses on the economic, political, and social transformations that characterized life in postcolonial village India. While I acknowledge that the way in which questions are asked and answered complicates the idea of any 'objective fact,' my goal here is to explore the empirical evidence for the changing relationships between urban and rural India that continue to shape contemporary communities. This analysis begins with a discussion of the

*jajmani* system before engaging two areas of immense change in the postcolonial state: 1) land ownership and agricultural practices, and 2) hierarchy, caste, and class. Throughout this discussion, the increasingly central role played by the city in the lives of village residents provides the backdrop for political, social and economic transformations. I conclude with an issue of contemporary concern: whether villagers can claim belonging in India's 'new middle class.' I argue that a historical analysis of class transformation is instrumental in answering this question.

### I. The *jajmani* system and caste interdependency

William Wiser's (1936) understanding of change as contingent upon contact with outside (i.e. urban) forces can be better understood in relation to his overall argument about the *jajmani* system as economically stable and self-sustaining. Wiser's description of hereditary economic relationships became the 'baseline' for many of the ethnographies that follow, so that economic change was often represented as a departure from the 'traditional' system of caste-interdependency and village unity. While this is surely an idealized version of economic relationships in the village, Wiser provides an astute description of the caste interrelationships that comprise the ideal *jajmani* system. Each caste performs a hereditary task for its patron, receiving in return a guaranteed portion of the yearly harvest. Wiser argues that this guarantee that one's subsistence needs will be met is an enduring form of economic security that, while based in a hierarchy of relationships, provides a valuable support network. He argues that the enduring strength of intergenerational economic ties between castes (Brahmins provide religious services while "kam karnewalas" provide labor, for example) is the reason why lower castes often do not abandon their social contracts in the village for employment opportunities in the city (Wiser 1936: 95). While this is an oversimplified representation of power structures and



economic practice, Wisner's analysis nonetheless tells us something useful about the ideal form of a caste-based system of reciprocity.

The strength of these economic ties are emphasized in postcolonial ethnographies as well, although with time, ethnographers began to focus more on the destruction rather than the persistence of the *jajmani* system. In *India's Villages* (1955), Eric J. Miller asserts that the caste-based system of reciprocity still operates in most Indian villages. He argues that despite new economic opportunities outside the village,

it would nevertheless be difficult to find a village where very many examples of the interdependence of castes do not survive, not only in its economic but in its more ritual aspects...Many families are still bound together in their ancient master-servant relationship. In villages near towns, increasing numbers of people have abandoned traditional occupations for labour in industry; but there are few instances of Hindus entering occupations proper to castes other than their own. (Miller 1955: 52-3)

For Miller, the tie between ritual and economic life sustains caste-based relationships. He sees these relationships as "ancient" and "traditional," and he draws a direct connection between new economic engagements and proximity to the city. The urban-rural relationship figures in many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies of village India as the primary site to examine the changing nature of caste interrelationships. This suggests both that ethnographers considered the *jajmani* system to be the 'baseline' form for the village economy, but also that urban markets had a large impact on changing economic relationships within the village.

## II. Changing land ownership and agricultural practice

The *jajmani* system rested upon a hierarchy of land ownership and agricultural labor. Following independence, property rights changed drastically. Each individual male became eligible for equal inheritance of land, often leading to the splitting up of large landholding families. Land entered the market, allowing for the potential (but often unrealized) redistribution

of the means of agricultural production. In addition to changes in land policy at the federal level, land reforms were implemented on a state-by-state basis. Zamindari (large, aristocratic landowners) abolition acts were adopted in many states with the intention of redistributing land and creating new relationships between land ownership and labor. While there were many ways around these new laws, most of the ethnographers working in village India following independence noted these changes in property rights as a determining factor in the reorganization of social, political, and economic relations (for example, see Mandelbaum 1955, Marriott 1955, Beals 1955, Lewis 1958, Srinivas 1968, Cohn 1971).

These changes had a drastic effect on village life, especially, according to David Mandelbaum, in the breaking up of the joint family into individual landowner-cultivators (1955: 16). They also shifted preexisting hierarchies, so that “in many parts of India, land reform has turned what had been single-head villages into multicasite and dominant-caste villagers” (Cohn 1971: 144). But in addition to transforming life in the village, these changes to land ownership also altered the relationship between the city and country. As plots of land grew smaller and joint families splintered into nuclear families, many men began looking for non-agricultural work. As Oscar Lewis (1958) notes, “the fact that over 50 per cent of the Jat landholding households have at least one family member employed outside the village suggests the inability of the limited land base to support the Jats adequately, much less all of the villagers” (Lewis 1958: 89-90). As the population grew and landholdings became smaller in size, fewer landowners could count on their own fields to provide subsistence, and more men were forced to look to growing urban markets to meet their families’ subsistence needs.

The breaking up of land into smaller plots was compounded by new technologies that focused agricultural production on cash crops such as sugarcane. With the implementation of the

First Five Year Plan and in each plan succeeding, the postcolonial state began to subsidize new technologies and implement infrastructural projects that changed agricultural practice in the countryside. In addition to providing access to new agronomic technologies such as artificial fertilizer (Dube 1955: 81), state development projects such as the construction of irrigation canals shifted agricultural practice away from subsistence and toward a cash economy. In Mysore (today Karnataka), a state irrigation project resulted in a shift to sugarcane production. With the building of a sugar mill in the nearby city and the transition to “wet” agriculture, villagers in Wangala began to focus their operations on sugarcane production (Epstein 1962). Over time, villagers began to rely on urban markets for meeting their subsistence needs:

Since irrigation, specialization has already proceeded to a certain extent; farmers grew a greater variety of vegetables and pulses when their land was dry; sugarcane has brought them a cash income, part of which they now utilize to purchase cheaply vegetables, pulses and fruit from market gardeners at Mandya’s weekly fair. (Epstein 1962: 79)

These changes in agricultural practice resulted in a fundamental shift from a subsistence to a cash-based economy, changing the relationship between the city and the country. Farmers supplied cash crops to urban markets, and purchased subsistence foods outside the village.

Despite the declining ability to meet one’s own subsistence needs, agricultural land remained a critical measure of social standing and economic security. T. Scarlett Epstein (1962) discusses the continuing importance of agricultural production as a form of economic security in an increasingly unstable market. In her discussion of a “dry” village that did not receive the benefits of irrigation, Epstein argues that agricultural land remained nevertheless crucial to economic security:

Dalena’s economy diversified. It is no longer wholly agricultural, nor largely subsistence. Many Dalena households derive the major part of their incomes in cash from sources other than agriculture. Yet land is still the basis of the village economy. Dalena villagers did not substitute for their farming activities work in

other spheres, but rather supplemented their farming incomes from sources beyond the village boundaries and outside agriculture. (Epstein 1962: 204)

Despite economic change, agriculture remained central to village life, suggesting that even with the introduction of new economic opportunities and new connections with urban markets, land ownership was still the primary source of social prestige and economic security in village India. Changing land ownership, new technologies, and new connections with urban markets thus altered agricultural practices in complex ways.

### III. New hierarchies(?): caste and class

The new agricultural practices and land ownership policies discussed above were initiated (although not always successfully implemented) by outside forces. Increased connections with urban centers were both the impetus for and result of such transformations. Whereas ethnographies of the *jajmani* system focused on the village as the center of each economic unit, with time ethnographers increasingly represented the village as economically and politically dependent upon an urban center. Associated with the growing connection between the city and the country were new educational, occupational, and political opportunities. While these opportunities offered the potential for new kinds of political engagements, there was a general sense among ethnographers that hierarchies were often strengthened rather than dismantled by urban contacts. This is related to a discussion of the overall structures of hierarchy in village life. Louis Dumont's (1970) analysis of hierarchy was a turning point in ethnographic considerations of social inequality that led to an influx of ethnographies detailing the Indian caste system. But caste-based hierarchy had long been a central element of ethnographic examinations of village India. For example, while the Wisers (1971) focused the majority of their attention on the economic securities and stabilities of the *jajmani* system, they also admitted the social

inequalities underlying the system.

The state's relationship to the caste system changed drastically with independence, when the Indian state abolished discrimination based on caste and set aside quotas for Scheduled castes in government positions. Despite these attempts at abolishing caste-based inequalities, the previous forms of hierarchy did not disappear. Many postcolonial ethnographers struggled with the fact that political changes directed at abolishing social inequalities, while potentially liberating, were seldom manifested in lived experiences. Here again Raymond Williams' analysis, though largely unconcerned with legal and political factors in the relationship between the country and the city, is useful for understanding the Indian context. Williams argues that despite an economic revolution, power structures often remain constant. For this reason, he claims that an economy based on peasant labor is more or less ethical than agrarian capitalism ignores the fact that for most laborers, this change was "the substitution of one form of domination for another" (Williams 1973: 39). Despite shifting material forms of hierarchy, then, economic transformations often reaffirm rather than disrupt preexisting power relations. This is reflected in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic approaches to the question of hierarchy in village India.

Perhaps the most often-cited hierarchy in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies was that between the country and the city. Village residents' fear and mistrust of city businessmen and political officials comes across very clearly in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies of village India. In his discussion of postcolonial politics, F. G. Bailey notes villagers' mistrust of political officials. State- and federal-level politics are of little relevance to villagers' daily lives, and villagers often assume that political officials, whom they see as outsiders, must have ulterior motives for garnering village-level support (Bailey 1969: 71). Dispelling these fears became a stated goal of the postcolonial state's rural development initiatives. As S. C. Dube discusses, "fraternalization"

was a stated goal of development programs, but villagers remained largely suspicious of official activity (Dube 1955: 119-20). Villager fear of urban actors reflects a hierarchy of relations in which villagers see themselves as disadvantaged.

This mistrust of the city and city-based individuals might well be justified. In the 1971 edition of *Behind Mud Walls*, the Wisers argue that the city drains and disrupts rural communities, and that despite government-initiated rural development programs,

city people had all the advantages and expected to keep them. They had the schools and colleges, and communications, police protection, medical services (both Ayurvedic and modern), the hospitals, libraries, entertainment, the bazaars where their needs were met, and the comforts of daily living. The city people and most minor officials, regarded the villagers as country bumpkins, incapable of adopting new ideas. The role of the village was to provide the cities with food and materials for clothing. City buyers took advantage of villagers who brought their grain or fruit or vegetables to the market. (Wiser & Wiser 1971: 196)

The hierarchy between the village and the city is clear in the Wisers' description, and reflects a still-prevailing association between the city as the heart of the 'modern' nation and the rural village as 'unmodern.' In addition to the development of a clear hierarchy in relations between villagers and city residents, the Wisers argue that connections with the city also create new hierarchies within the village. While access to urban markets had led to economic success for some, it also deprived those castes that depended on village clientele who were increasingly drawn to the cheaper prices of the city (Wiser & Wiser 1971: 188). For the Wisers, urban markets had begun the destruction of the *jajmani* system, resulting in increased economic insecurity for those already lowest in the village hierarchy.

The question of who benefits and who is further disenfranchised by urban connections is one dealt with by many mid-century ethnographers. Like the Wisers, S. C. Dube (1955) argues that connections with the city became a new form of social distinction that reaffirmed social hierarchies in the village:

Although there is considerable prejudice and skepticism among the village people regarding city ways and other urban traits of culture, in general it may be said that the village-folk acknowledge the importance and superiority of the townspeople. Those who have urban contacts seek to distinguish themselves from the ordinary village folk in their dress, manner of speech, food and recreations. Imitation of urban ways in the last decade and a half has come to be recognized as a distinguishing feature of respectable elements of the village population. (Dube 1955: 165)

Urban connections, then became a significant form of cultural capital. Similarly, education became an increasingly important marker of status, one that often bolstered existing hierarchies, both within the village and between the village and the city. The increasing importance of education and urban contacts in social prestige were tied, as highly educated individuals were also the most likely to live in the city:

The indications are that, unlike their less educated fellow villagers in urban employment, the graduates will sever their ties with the village completely and, becoming contemptuous of village ways of life, will try to become fully-fledged townsmen. The few graduates who may be attracted back to the village will probably be sons of established magnates or they will use their broader education to try and join the wealthiest. They will therefore reinforce the traditional socio-economic system of the village. (Epstein 1973: 240)

Urban connections and the educational opportunities, therefore, largely reaffirmed existing social hierarchies and power relationships in the village.

Despite the role education plays in upholding preexisting hierarchies, it also has the potential to shift power relationships. In his discussion of factions, Oscar Lewis (1958) argues, “education is beginning to provide a new basis for unity between individuals on a non-kinship level. For example, the children of opposing village factions who have been to a higher school together are developing bonds which in the future may affect faction alignments” (Lewis 1958: 148). Many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers argued that the increase in educational and employment opportunities outside the village could have a positive effect on caste relationships and hierarchies within the village. For example, the Gandhian movement for caste equality

became more widely known through urban connections, so that it became “common to hear sharp criticism of the caste system in the villages of this area” (Dube 1955: 27). In addition, Bernard Cohn (1971) suggests that new educational possibilities for women will result in changing gender relationships that might result in new forms of mobility for women (Cohn 1971: 164).<sup>2</sup>

These new opportunities are tied up in the different forms of mobility associated with caste and class. The caste system was probably never as rigid as once believed. M. N. Srinivas’ (1968) concept of “Sanskritization,” or the upward mobility of castes through the adoption of rituals and religious practices reserved for the upper castes, was taken up by many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers. This kind of caste mobility is very different, however, from the economically based upward mobility provided by class. The most often agreed upon distinction between class and caste lies in the differential forms of mobility associated with each term: class-based mobility is realized on an individual level, whereas caste mobility must be realized at the group level (Epstein 1962: 128). This is related to the hereditary nature of caste, which is responsible for the ‘closed’ nature of the caste system: “classes are – in principle and, to some extent, in practice – open; castes are not” (Béteille 1996: 190). André Béteille uses Weberian and Marxist understandings of class to differentiate between the two terms: castes are “styles of life” (1996: 188), while classes are “hierarchically arranged social categories, based broadly upon ownership or nonownership of the means of production” (Béteille 1996: 187).

The distinction between caste and class is tied with a changing economic system focused

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<sup>2</sup> While a consideration of gender does appear in many of the ethnographic representations of village India, women are most often discussed in terms of the ‘traditional’ division of labor. Unlike what one may expect, however, there were no clear associations made by these ethnographers between men and the city or women and the country; rather, women were discussed alongside men in analyses of village labor relations. How women were differently affected by the changes following independence was left largely unacknowledged. An examination of ethnographic representations of gender is outside the scope of this paper, but deserves a thorough investigation.



increasingly on a cash-based economy. S. C. Dube attempts to map out a newly emerging class system that is intimately linked with but also independent from caste. He distinguishes between

three distinct groups according to their socio-economic status: A) The upper group of agriculturalists, and upper-status and higher income segments of the population, consisting mainly of the dominant agricultural caste as well as the upper castes and a few people with better economic status drawn from the other castes. B) The middle group of less well-to-do agriculturalists, and artisans and occupational castes. C) The lower group of low-status and lower income castes (consisting mainly of untouchables, and other poor agricultural labourers.) (Dube 1963: 57)

These social groups are aligned with caste but have the potential to create solidarity between those in similar economic positions, regardless of caste relationships. But there is disagreement whether the term “class” is useful for understanding these new alliances. F.G. Bailey, in his analysis of political systems and relationships between state officials, village panchayats and local residents, argues against the use of the term “class” to understand social groupings. In discussing the creation of powerful political groups based not on caste but on other markers of solidarity, Bailey asks:

Can we take the further step and say that this is a middle class, a group to be set in opposition to the peasants or the landless labourers or the industrial workers of Orissa? If we can do so, then we are on the way to setting up another framework within which to understand Orissa politics. Once we have further established that peasants or workers are similarly to be considered groups, then Orissa politics can be envisaged as the conflict of economic classes; we have one arena in which the different classes fight it out with one another. But this will not do. Firstly there is no corporate group of peasants or of workers. Secondly, when the arena of elite politics does undergo a process of fusion and the establishment closes its ranks, it is not in opposition to those whom they rule and perhaps exploit, but in opposition to establishments elsewhere – to other States or the Delhi Government. In relation to its own subjects, the establishment becomes most internecine. (Bailey 1965: 228-9)

Solidarity is not, therefore, class-based, but rather is made up of “parties” drawn largely along caste lines.

Rather than asking whether class exists in Indian society, André Béteille suggests that

class has always existed but had previously been “subsumed under the caste structure” (Béteille 1996: 191). The question whether caste and class are still two versions of the same social hierarchy informs many investigations of social groupings. Despite the potential mobilities provided by the transition from caste to class, the empirical evidence from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies suggests that newly established class hierarchies largely mapped onto preexisting caste hierarchies. As Dube discusses, “a closer analysis of the agricultural extension work itself reveals that nearly 70 per cent of its benefits went to the *élite* group and to the more affluent and influential agriculturalists. The gains to poorer agriculturalists were considerably smaller” (Dube 1955: 82-3). In addition, political hierarchies largely stayed the same. State cooperation with ‘leaders’ of the village community “was construed by some villagers as an effort on the part of the government to maintain a *status quo* in the internal power relations within village communities and indirectly as a step to support the domination of the landholding groups” (Dube 1963: 125). Thus, while the state explicitly sought to change the power dynamics of caste relationships by allotting caste quotas and abolishing untouchability, the way in which state development programs were operationalized often reaffirmed existing leadership hierarchies aligned largely with land ownership and caste inequalities.

The above analysis of the shifting relationship between caste and class provides historical context to the contemporary debate about whether the middle class is inherently urban or if it can exist in a village context. The word ‘middle class’ most immediately evokes an image of a city-based professional, whose lifestyle is defined by participation in an urban “leisure and entertainment industry” (Fernandes 2006: 142). Such a definition of the ‘new middle class’ limits its existence to the city, as class belonging is predicated upon a distinctly urban and ‘modern’ style of life. But if we define class as differential ownership of the means of production, there is

no reason why the middle class should not also exist in the village. Roger Jeffery, Patricia Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey take up this issue in their essay, “Are Rich Rural Jats Middle-Class?” (2011). They argue that “seriously rich” rural Jat families can indeed be called middle class, although their status is perhaps more tenuous outside the village, where “they cannot easily shake off the taint of the rural” (Jeffery et al. 2011: 141). These rural middle class families must constantly assert their connection to the city, “negotiat[ing] the dilemmas of their rural residence, through the rural-urban social networks they maintain, and their attempts to cultivate an ‘urban’ or ‘modern’ style *within* their rural homes and villages” (Jeffery et al. 2011: 142). The rural middle class must therefore claim and maintain relationships with the city.

A consideration of the historical hierarchies between village and urban communities sheds light on this discussion. As mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies illuminate, the country and the city have long been tied up in exchange relations that deny their separation into discrete units. Urban workers were reluctant to cut all ties to the village and sell their agricultural land, and rural villagers looked to urban connections as a form of cultural and political capital in the village. But there was also a clear hierarchy between these associations. The potential for change and mobility within the village was predicated on contact with a ‘modern’ city. In light of this connection, it makes sense that the middle class would be represented as inherently urban. But an analysis of urban-rural relationships also complicates such a representation by suggesting that the labor relations that define life in the city also define life in the village, and that the economic mobilities that characterized the city rested on relationships of production in the village. Thus, while there are surely those in the village who belong to the middle class as indicative of a particular relationship to the means of production, a consideration of the markers of the middle class, mainly urban consumption, makes rural claims to middle class lifestyles tenuous. This

example illuminates the ways in which a historical analysis of the relationship between the city and the country can inform contemporary understandings of class.

## **Conclusion**

The village was a site of immense change in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Postcolonial state development programs disrupted any clean break between the wider political system and the “little republic” of the village, and burgeoning capitalist markets denied any idealized caste-based system of reciprocity. Ethnographers began to examine the village as part of a much larger network. This shifting of focus to relations outside the village also brought about greater attention to change. While the earliest postcolonial ethnographies struggled to represent the village as unified and ‘traditional,’ while at the same time identifying the drastic changes taking place in village communities, later ethnographies began to focus their analysis on relationships outside the village as the key to understanding village life. Economic considerations, especially in terms of changing relationships to land, labor, and the market, formed the basis for a reorientation away from the village as economic center to the village as determined by its relations with an urban economy, indicating a clear geography to processes of transformation. These relationships were tied up in new examinations of hierarchies, including a consideration of class versus caste. A historical analysis of the changing relationship between the city and the country, then, as well as the ways in which this relationship was represented, can illuminate the economic, political, and social contingencies of the rural-urban distinction, arguing for an approach to these categories as dynamic and mutually constitutive.

While the above analysis has been historical, I suggest that an examination of the changing relationship between the city and the country, as well as how this is represented and discussed, has useful implications for contemporary studies of urban and rural India. For one, it

suggests that it is impossible to completely extricate one category from the other. As Raymond Williams argues, the relationships of exchange in the village are enforced in the city, and vice versa. Contemporary analyses that parcel out urban and rural into discrete communities miss the ways in which these categories are defined through their interaction. This is not to suggest that the categories of urban and rural are useless. Rather, it is to suggest that an examination of the interactions between the country and the city sheds new light on issues of contemporary concern.

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