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Competing Modernities: Ambedkar, Village and Manu

by

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The main theme of this paper is to underline two competing models of the postcolonial modernity with a special focus on the status of village, which were perceived, articulated and voiced at the time of India's freedom. The roots of these competing models lie in the way India was imagined as civilisation, nation or state. The articulators of the models were largely western educated and they got the best opportunity to express them during the debates of the Constituent Assembly between December 1946 and January 1950. The members of the Constituent Assembly were committed to modernise independent India, but they were guided by their perspectives and ideologies. The British rule in India had already established the foundation of western modernity in areas, such as education, law, bureaucracy, transport and communication networks, and rudimentary democracy. However, the British rule was not founded on the principle of welfare state. Some of the steps undertaken by the British government were later on recognised as harmful to the Indian society. For example, the permanent settlement and separate electorate. Notwithstanding the fact that the members of the Constituent Assembly could be divided along multiple axes thereby indicating that there were many models of modernity, the issue of village drew two points of view in the domain discussion: one representing Gandhian perspective and the other liberal western perspective. However, the issue was much more complex due to the intertwining of various forces, interests and ideologies.

The concepts of modern and modernity have been subjects of serious theoretical discourses and I have no intention of treading the path of reviewing the competing theories, though I have two points to make. First, concept of modern is connected with some degree of temporality and ambiguity, in the sense that in common parlance contemporary times are used as coterminous with modern times. At the same time, modern world is interpreted as the period which began at the time of the breakdown of the Dark Ages and ushering in of the renaissance in Europe through the rediscovery of Greek philosophy and the beginning of capitalism. The best way to describe modernity is to identify it with the age of reason and science. The arrival of Postmodernity has turned it a sandwiched stage between per-modern and postmodern.

Secondly, following Chandra (1992: 2-3) I strongly hold the view that the binary opposition between modernity and tradition is normative and ideological. It is important to quote him at length thus:

The dichotomy is projected back to explain and categorize even those actions, attitudes, beliefs and values that did not rest on, or stem from, such a polarity. After all, people can – as often happened in nineteenth-century India – view the phenomena designated 'modernity' and 'tradition' without opposing them to each other. In such perceptions there may even be reversing

of the way in which these two constituent units figure in the explanatory framework of modernization.

Therefore, it is important that imagining postcolonial modernity could not be treated as either dichotomy or in the singular. There is need to use modernity in plural to pave the way for accommodating and arguing in a historical situation in which the future of the country was at stake. In the case of India extensive debates on the future of India took place in the meetings of Constituent Assembly between December 9, 1946 and November 26, 1949. The contents of these debates clearly show that there were multiple imaginings of modern India and on each issue the members were divided not necessarily along party lines, but on the bases of perspectives and ideologies. One of the issues debated was the conceptualisation of the Indian village as site of tradition. The first part of the paper takes cognisance of the debate by situating Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee in the centre of the debate.

I. Ambedkar and Village

All formalities for the preparation of the draft Constitution were completed on January 27, 1948, in the meeting of the Constituent Assembly. The President of the Constituent Assembly informed the members that “I expect the drafting Committee to give me the final draft about the middle of February and as soon as the final draft is received, it will be printed and it will be sent to the press and it will also be published in the Gazette....” . He informed that he would fix the suitable date for the next session of the Constituent Assembly. The next session was held on November 4, 1948 and the members were further informed that there would be discussion on the Draft Constitution starting next day, which would be divided into two parts, that is, general discussion and article by article discussion.

It was a historical occasion when Ambedkar began his speech on November 4, 1948. In a way, the most educated man in the Constituent Assembly had been appointed as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee and he was a Dalit - belonging to an untouchable caste. Two things were unprecedented in this. One was that a Dalit could get higher education which showed that the colonial India had provided certain enabling environment for the lower castes to get education, which also included the changing minds of some Princes in India. Secondly, nationalism enabled a Dalit to be the chairman of the Drafting Committee, particularly in the backdrop of the fact that Ambedkar-Gandhi relationship remained sour throughout after the Poona Pact in 1932. It is important to quote his preliminary remarks before taking up his views on village:

The Draft Constitution as it has emerged from the Drafting Committee is a formidable document. It contains 315 Articles and 8 schedules. It must be admitted that the Constitution of country could be found to be so bulky as the Draft Constitution. It would be difficult for those who have not been through it to realize its salient features.

The Draft Constitution has been before the public for eight months. During this long time friends, critics and adversaries have had more than

sufficient time to express their reactions to the provisions contained in it. I dare say some of them are based on misunderstanding and inadequate understanding of the Articles. But there the criticisms are and they have to be answered.

Was this bulky Draft Constitution a result of the hard labour of the Drafting Committee? It seemed so, but T. T. Krishnamachari from Madras, who was inducted in the Drafting Committee after the death of Debi Prosad Khaitan said in the Assembly on November 5, 1948 that

I am one of those in the House who have listened to Dr. Ambedkar very carefully. I am aware of the amount of work and enthusiasm that he has brought to bear on the work of drafting this Constitution. At the same time, I do realise that that amount of attention that was necessary for the purpose of drafting a constitution so important to us at this moment has not been given to it by the Drafting Committee. The House is perhaps aware that of the seven members nominated by you, one had resigned from the House and was replaced. One died and was not replaced. One was away in America and his place was not filled up and another person was engaged in State affairs, and there was a void to the extent. One or two people were far away from Delhi and perhaps reasons of health did not permit them to attend. So it happened ultimately that the burden of drafting this constitution fell on Dr. Ambedkar and I have no doubt that we are grateful to him for having achieved this task in a manner which is undoubtedly commendable.

It thus becomes clear that in certain ways Ambedkar was the spirit behind the drafting of the Constitution of India and his role should not be seen as merely the chairman of the Drafting Committee. After introducing the Draft Constitution he moved the motion in the Assembly for consideration. He spoke on salient features of the Constitution in the beginning and in the process also responded to some of the criticisms which had already been made in the public domain. It is interesting to note that Ambedkar gave considerable space to the question of village in his speech. He reacted to criticism wherein it was stated that the Constitution did not provide the central space to the village panchayats; it should have been drafted on the basis of ancient Hindu model of political system. He said,

The love of the intellectual Indians for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic. It is largely due to the fulsome praise bestowed upon it by Metcalfe who described this as little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. The existence of these village communities each one forming a separate little state in itself has according to Metcalfe contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India, through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered, and is in a high degree conducive to their happiness and to the enjoyment of great portion of the freedom and

independence. No doubt the village communities have lasted where nothing else lasts.

He concluded his comment by stating, “What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit”. November 4, 1949 is a moment in the history of India when liberal democracy was founded on the individual as the unit. And the individual overrode the village – the most chastised unit of Indian social life. In this way, Ambedkar’s that part of speech which critiqued Indian village has twofold significance in the construction of post-colonial modernity. Ambedkar broke the imaginary construction of the village as the ideal social space. Simplicity, tradition, closeness with nature, a great sense of community, etc. were attached with the meaning of the village. He provided an opposite picture of the village as a social space of human degradation. Secondly, it was a statement which confronted and contested Gandhi’s idea of Hind Swaraj. However he was not alone in his views on the Indian village life. Gandhi’s views on village were not even shared by Nehru. At the end of the Second World War in 1945 when independence was imminent and it was the time when, as Chandra (1994) informs, Gandhi wrote a letter to Nehru, which reiterated his position with regard to his conception of independent India. Gandhi believed that in order to attain true freedom we would have to live in villages. He wrote to Nehru, “You will not understand me if you think that I am talking about the villages of today “My villages today exist in my imagination....“After all, every person lives in the world of his own imagination”. He then outlined the village of his imagination, “The villager in this imagined village will not be apathetic – he will embody pure consciousness. He will not lead his life like an animal in a squalid dark room. Men and women will live freely and be prepared to face the whole world. The village will not know cholera, plague or smallpox. No one will live indolently, nor luxuriously” (c.f. Chandra 1994: 45-46).

It is clear from the above that Gandhi was building a utopia, but in the process, at the same time, he was constructing the Indian nation and showing the way for nation-building. Chandra (ibid.) informs us that Nehru received the letter and ‘sent off a provisional answer on October 9’. His answer implicated an altogether different notion of India – a notion representing European modernity. He wrote, “Briefly put, my view is that the question before us is not one of truth versus untruth or non-violence versus violence I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much likely to be untruthful and violent. (c.f. Chandra ibid. :46).

In the light of the above knowledge about Nehru’s views on village, one could easily assume that Nehru was on the side of Ambedkar with regard to his views on Indian villages which he made part of his speech. Reminding oneself that Gandhi and his ideology had permeated into the Congress cadres it is also possible to look back at the reaction of some of the members of the Constituent Assembly. It began immediately after Ambedkar moved the Draft Constitution for discussion, which began on November 5, 1948. After the preliminary

discussion on modalities, expressions and legalities, the first to make comment on Ambedkar's views on village was HV Kamath who said,

One thing I join issue with Dr. Ambedkar. He was pleased to refer to the villages..... as “sinks of localism and dens of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism”; and he also laid at the door of certain Metcalfe our “pathetic faith” in village communities. Sir, I may say that it is not owing to Metcalfe but owing to far greater man who liberated us in recent times, our master and the Father of our nation, that this love of ours for the villages has grown, our faith in the village republics and our rural communities has grown and we have cherished it with all our heart. It is due to Mahatma Gandhi, it is due to you, Sir, and it is due to Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru and Netaji Bose that we have come to love our village folk.

He contended that Ambedkar's attitude towards the village was that of an ‘urban highbrow’ and was not acceptable. He then went on to identify the problem in terms of the urban background of the members of the Drafting Committee and pointed out that with the exception of Sriyut Munshi none of them had participated in the freedom struggle. He then went on to underline that India's ancient polity was organised around village communities ‘which were autonomous and self-contained’. Obvious implication of such an emphasis was that the villages were indispensable for the political life of the country. He further added, “I believe the day is not distant when not merely India but the whole world, if it wants peace and security and happiness, will have to decentralise and establish village republics and town republics, and on the basis of this they will have to build their State; otherwise the world is in for hard times”. Kamath was interrupted by the President that his time had exhausted. After requesting the President for another couple of minutes, he went on commenting on Ambedkar's speech and argued for Panchayati Raj.

It is essential to inform that the discussion on Ambedkar's speech and the Draft Constitution was of general nature, as the debate on each of the articles of the Constitution had not yet started. Village did not occupy the importance among members if compared with the question of minorities, parliamentary system vs. presidential system, or federal structure vs. unitary structure. Despite all this some members could give the issue importance simply because Ambedkar had drawn a negative picture of the Indian village to show the way village was imagined under the leadership of Gandhi. On November 6, 1948, Arjun Chandra Guha from Bengal made it a point to digress from his main arguments to give special attention to what Ambedkar had said about village. He said,

Dr. Ambedkar has passed some remarks about the village units. We have been in the Congress for years. We have been taught to think of the village panchayats as the future basis of administrative machinery. The Gandhian and the Congress outlook has been that the future constitution of India would be a pyramidal structure and its basis would be the village panchayats. According to Dr. Ambedkar, the villages have been the ruination of India, the villages have been the den of ignorance. If that has been the case

now, that is due to us who have been living in towns, who have been shining under the foreign bureaucracy and foreign rule. Our villages have been starved; our villages have been strangled deliberately by the foreign government; and towns-people have played the willing tool in this ignoble task. Resuscitating of the villages, I think, should be the first task of the future free India.

Guha made a politically correct speech, but his comments were sociologically inappropriate. It seems reasonable to argue that Gandhi-Ambedkar conflict worked in the minds of these members. Immediately after Guha, T. Prakasam from Madras was asked to speak after the Vice-President cautioned the members not to exceed time limit while speaking. He was blunt enough to say, "With all due respect to the Honourable Dr. Ambedkar, I must say that he has not been able to put himself in the position of those who had been fighting for the freedom of this country for thirty long Years". It was quite clear that the man of the moment was resented by many Congress men for his anti-Gandhi stance as well as his non-participation in the freedom movement. Prakasam went on to add,

It is not a matter which should have been treated by Dr. Ambedkar in that manner. That was a condition to which we had been reduced, after the village panchayats had been exhausted on account of the oppression of the various foreign rulers who had come over to this country. Still in spite of all that had been done for their suppression, they had survived. That is what Metcalfe wanted to explain to the world and to us who have been ignoring it. Therefore village panchayat is not to be condemned on this basis. I do not advocate for one moment today that village panchayats should be such as described by Metcalfe under those circumstances. Village panchayats should be one which is up-to-date, which gives real power to rule and to get money and expend it, in the hands of the villagers.

One may be reminded of the 73rd amendment of the Constitution, which has been considered a landmark act in empowering the Dalits and women. Prakasam's comment offers us a new window to peep into the village life and understand the drudgery of village in the light of what history has done to it. However, little is realised that such a way of empowering the excluded in the village, if we keep in mind Ambedkar's views, would simply imply that the desired outcome is likely to happen. It may be stated that though Parkasam's statement makes it clear that in the absence of his participation in the nationalist movement, that is Gandhi-led movement, Ambedkar was least qualified to draft constitution of India; or at least make judgement on Indian villages. He did not understand that drafting of constitution was an act for which he was supremely qualified.

On the same day in the afternoon, that is, November 6, 1948, K. Santhanam from Madras, who served as railway minister in Nehru's cabinet, while referring to Ambedkar's comments on village, said, "I do not agree with his condemnation of the village panchayats and his statement that they are responsible for all the national disasters". As a matter of fact, he opined, despite all changes the villages have preserved the Indian culture and saved

society form anarchy. An attempt should be made to set autonomous village panchayats for which there is a need for such provision in the Constitution, because “in the long run local autonomy for each village must constitute the basic framework for the future freedom of this country”. The same day, Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava from East Punjab, after a long speech touching on various aspects of the Draft Constitution, spoke on what and how the village India should exist by assuming that Ambedkar’s views on it had been negated. He said,

The urban people and the rural people are so much apart from each other in their modes of living and outlook on life. To go near the villages is very difficult. The urban people do not go to the villages. I know the Congress has gone to the villages all honour to the Congress. But, there are a good many in the Congress also who do not wish to go to the villages; they cannot go because their mode of living is different. You will have to evolve such constituencies in which the cities and villages come in without any distinction; if there is a constituency for a lakh of the population, the cities and villages should be included in one constituency.

Bhargava seemed in agreement with Ambedkar on the characterisation of villages, though he argued that something could be done instead of damning the villages. He misunderstood Ambedkar in the sense that when he introduced the Draft Constitution, his speech touched upon the village in terms of what would be the unit of Indian citizenship – individual or collective. In the process of elimination and with the knowledge that Gandhi had extolled villages, he argued that village could not be the unit of citizenship. However, the matter was clearly discerned by some of the members among whom many chose to ignore the issue of village, but some of them took it up quite seriously. One of them was Prof. Shibani Lal Saksena from United Provinces who spoke in the afternoon of November 6, 1948. He spoke as a Gandhian activist with a sense of history about what happened in 1932 between Gandhi and Ambedkar. He said,

Sir, Dr. Ambedkar has criticised the system of village panchayats which prevailed in India and which was envisaged by our elders to be an ideal basis for our Constitution. I was just now reading Mahatma Gandhi’s speech in the 1931 Round Table Conference in London. He was speaking about the method of election to the Federal Legislature. There he recommended that villages should be the electoral units. He in fact gave fundamental importance to the village republics. He said that it was in villages that the real soul of India lived. I was really sorry that Dr. Ambedkar should express such views about the village panchayats. I am certain that his views are not the views of any other member of the House.

Then Saksena quoted verbatim what Ambedkar had stated about village. He reiterated his position by referring to the successful running of Congress village panchayats for two and half decades and hoped that “village republics, like the Russian village Soviets, can become models for good self-government”. Saksena was followed by Sarangdhar Das from Orissa who expressed his shock that Ambedkar could characterise Indian village as ‘a sink of

localism...’ and asserted that “there is more wisdom and more knowledge in the villages than in our modern cities”.

When the House met on November 8, 1948 on Monday, Ambedkar found one supporter in the form of Begum Aizaz Rasul from United Provinces who also took note of lot of criticism of Ambedkar on account of his remarks on village. The next speaker was Dr. Monomohan Das from West Bengal, who pointed out that the Drafting Committee had forgotten to include the village Panchayat system and had “wilfully left it to the provincial legislatures to frame whatever they like about this Village Panchayat System. Das cautioned members who were enthusiastically supporting the village panchayats. He pointed out that so long as the villagers were not educated and politically conscious, the panchayat system would do more harm to them than good. In the absence of education and awareness, “the local influential classes will absorb to themselves all the powers and privileges that will be given to the Panchayat system and they will utilise it for their selfish motives. This system will enable the village zamindars, the village talukdars, the Mahajans and the money-lending classes to rob, to exploit the less cultured, the less educated, poorer classes of the village”. Das made prophetic observation on the future of village. The present scenario is more or less similar to what he told in the House.

On the same day, another speaker on Ambedkar’s views on village and who expressed his feelings of hurt over Ambedkar’s remark on village as ‘sink of localism and den of ignorance’ was Gokulbhai Daulatram Bhatt from Bombay. He stated, “I was grieved to find that our great Pandit with all his knowledge of Sanskrit and politics has opposed the system of village Panchayats in this way. If the village is to be discarded, someone can also boldly demand that this constitution be discarded. But I am a humble person and do not have much experience either”. Bhatt was aware of the fact that Ambedkar had the knowledge of Sanskrit and we may assume that he also knew that he learnt Sanskrit from outside his country. Could he learn Sanskrit in an Indian village? It seemed that Ambedkar by intent did not attend the general discussion on his Draft Constitution. Bhatt was followed by Nehru who gave long speech, but nowhere did he mention village and its virtues.

The discussion on the Draft Constitution, as had been decided by the Vice-President, Dr. H. C. Mookherjee, who was chairing the proceedings of the Assembly in the absence of the President, was to be concluded on November 8, 1948. When the Vice-President asked Alladi Krishanaswami Ayyar from Madras, there were still forty members who had not got the time to speak. Ayyar started his speech by saying that “I do not share the views of my honourable Friend in his condemnation of village communities in India”. He then went on to summarise the debate so far had taken place. He touched upon the issue of village in the following manner:

The constitution does not give sufficient importance to village communities which are an essential feature of India’s social and political life. With the large powers vested in the provincial or state legislatures in regard to local self-government and other matters, there is nothing to prevent the provincial

legislatures, from constituting the villages as administrative units for discharge of various functions vested in the state government.

It should be reminded that Ayyar was member of the Drafting Committee, which means that he largely agreed with Ambedkar on the question of individual as unit, but he might have felt that villages could be the administrative units in certain ways. Ayyar came from a village in Madras and excelled in education and became advocate general of Madras. He was not an active Congress nationalist, but he felt that perhaps Ambedkar had exceeded limits by manifesting his views about village. Ayyar's summing up should have concluded the general discussion, but it was extended by one day, as more members wanted to speak on the Draft Constitution. On November 9, 1948, the first person to take into consideration the issue of village was Prof. N. G. Ranga from Madras. He said, "I am most unhappy that Dr. Ambedkar should have said what he has said about village panchayats". He asserted that Ambedkar had no knowledge of the village panchayats in Southern India. Rather than reading the history of other countries, he should have read Indian history, he said. He also argued that instead of centralisation India needed decentralised administration in which the village as a unit would play the most important role. For Prof. Ranga village symbolised decentralisation. It will be important to quote some of his lines to have taste of his language of ideas thus

The necessity for providing as many political institutions as possible in order to enable our villagers to gain as much experience in democratic institutions as possible in order to be able to discharge their responsibilities through adult suffrage in the new democracy that we are going to establish. Without this foundation stone of village panchayats in our country, how would it be possible for our masses to play their rightful part in our democracy? Sir, do we want centralisation of administration or decentralisation? Mahatma Gandhi has pleaded over a period of thirty years for decentralization.

Thus village then became a symbol of decentralisation and realisation of Gandhi's ideas and philosophy. It should also be noted that most of the comments did not take cognisance of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and, as his letter to Nehru mentioned earlier shows, his village was an ideal existed in his mind. It is possible to interpret the importance of village in Gandhi's philosophy. Kishorimohan Tripathi from C. P. and Berar spoke on November 9, 1948 and took up the matter of villages in his speech, which seemingly clinched the issue thus

There has been very sharp criticism of the view expressed by Dr. Ambedkar when he said that "the villages are den of ignorance". There has been ruthless criticism. I know this criticism is because of a genuine feeling on the part of the House. The House desires that the villages should come forward and play their full part in the national reconstruction. Since the desire is very genuine, I would request the House to detail out the election procedure in the Constitution itself. While giving adult franchise to every citizen of India, the eligibility for election to legislatures should be restricted to such persons as

neither pay income-tax nor hold land in excess of 100 acres. That, I am sure, would bring in most of the villagers to the legislatures and they will be able to play their best role.

In the afternoon of November 9, 1948, Moturi Satyanarayana from Madras brought up the issue of Swaraj with regard to village without criticising Ambedkar. He said, “The people know what swaraj means..... But only the international view-point, and not the national nor the swaraj, nor even the villagers’ view-point, is being given weight in the framing of this Constitution”. It is interesting to note that most of the speakers including Satyanaryana placed in the centre of their discourse the thirty years of struggle. It seems that the period they had been identifying as a phase in national struggle was the one during which Gandhi became the main political and ideological force. When N. Madhava Rau from Orissa spoke, he seemed to be critical of Gandhians in the Assembly and made a comment that “It is very unfortunate that a good deal of controversy arose in regard to village panchayats. Dr. Ambedkar’s strong remarks on the subject were apparently based on his own experience”. However, he reverted back to Gandhi on the question of village after narrating the positive experience of development of village communities in Mysore and then he quoted Gandhi, “If the majority of congressmen were derived from our villages, they should be able to make villages models of cleanliness in every sense”. Rau pointed out that there was nothing in the Draft Constitution which would prevent the state governments from developing the panchayat institutions.

After five days of discussion on the motion and the response of Syed Muhammad Saaduula (member of the Drafting Committee) to the motion, “That Constituent Assembly do proceed to take into consideration the Draft Constitution of India settled by the Drafting Committee appointed in pursuance of the resolution of the Assembly dated 29th day of August, 1947” on November 9, 1949, the Assembly proceeded to take up the proposed document Article by Article.

On November 22, 1948, after the Article 31 was added to the Constitution after discussion and amendments, a new Article 31-A as an amendment was moved in the Assembly. It was amendment No. 927 which stood by the name of M. Ananthasayanam Ayyangar who prayed to the Vice-President that K. Santhanam’s amendment was better worded than his and should be taken for discussion. The Vice-President accepted his request and asked K. Santhanam to move the amendment who did so thus

That after article 31, the following new article be added:-

‘31-A. The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government’.

Santhanam went on to elaborate that many other members had proposed similar amendments. He emphasised that how much power was to be given to the village panchayats was a matter which would vary from state to state. He added, “What is attempted to do here is to give a definite and unequivocal direction that the state shall take steps to organise panchayats and

shall endow them with necessary powers and authority to enable them to function as units of self-government". Immediately after Santhanam completed his speech, Ambedkar was on his feet and said, "Sir, I accept the amendment". It seems that the pressure of the Gandhians, who considered Ambedkar as the opponent, might have weighed on him to accept the amendment. It should be reminded that with the Congress majority in the Assembly, the amendment could have been adopted and added to the Constitution even if Ambedkar had opposed it.

It might have been assumed that once Ambedkar accepted the amendment, the matter was finally settled, but it did not happen in that manner. Some members still felt the need to remind Ambedkar how erroneous his views about Indian villages were. T. Prakasam, the future chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and destined to be remembered as Andhra Kesri, was the first to create ripples in the minds of the modernists who might be sharing with Ambedkar the view about Indian villages. He said,

Sir, a very serious situation was created by not making the village republic or the village unit as the real basis of the Constitution. It must be acknowledged on all hands that this is a construction which is begun at the top and which is going down to the bottom. What is suggested in this direction by Dr. Rajendra Prasad himself was that the structure must begin from the foundations and it must go up. That, Sir is the Constitution which the departed Mahatma Gandhi indicated and tried to work up for nearly thirty years.....

One of the distinguished friends of this House was remarking the other day to me, "why are you thinking of these village republics and all these things? The bullock cart days have gone; they will never come back?" This was his observation.[But] these village republics would convert the work of these bullock carts to work of carrying paddy and other produce which they produce in the village for their own benefit and for the benefit of the public.

The speech of Prakasam did not have any such content which had not been said earlier so far. For example, thirty years of Gandhi's political life and his emphasis on village remained the core of such speeches of most of the members. However, Prakasam was able to pinpoint one issue which he thought was connected with villages. The year 1948 was the year of communist movements in India and the Communist Party of India (CPI) had been engaged in various mass struggles most of which involved peasantry. Even in Punjab a strong peasant movement called the Red Communist Party movement was essentially the culmination of tenant movement which came under the control of breakaway group of the communist party. The Telangana movement was still going on. The CPI was experimenting with different tactics and Ranadive's mass upsurge line was just a couple of weeks away. Thus after treading the usual path Prakasam added the following comment thus "Communism can be checked immediately if the villages are organised in this manner and if they are made to function properly. There would be no temptation for our own people to become communists and to go about killing our own people as they have been doing". Surendra Mohan Ghose from West Bengal expressed his views that the importance/relevance of Constitution could

only be ascertained had it taken under its umbrella the 'crores and crores of the people of India' and by amending the Draft Constitution the right action had been undertaken. However Seth Govind Das from C. P. and Berar was intent upon beating the old bush but adding some fresh elements into it. He said,

Ours is an ancient, a very ancient country and the village has had always an important position here. This has not been so with every ancient country. In Greece, for instance, towns had greater importance than villages. The Republics of Athens and Sparta occupy a very important place in the world history today. But no importance was attached by them to the villages. But in our country the village occupied such an important position that even in the legends contained in most ancient books – Upanishads – if there are descriptions of the forest retreats, of the sages, there are also descriptions of villages..... Modern historians have also admitted this fact.

Seth Govind Das mentioned Henry Maine¹, Baden-Powell² and B. C. Pal and concluded his comments on village by mentioning Gandhi, but with a little difference. He informed that Gandhi was clear that if anyone wanted to know the real India, then he/she should go to villages. Das lamented in the end that despite the fact 80 per cent of the population in India lived in villages, there was no mention of villages in the Constitution. Das was followed by V. I. Muniswamy Pillai from Madras, who reiterated his commitment to village and Gandhi and welcomed the decision that finally village had found mention in the Constitution and also added that villages were also the source of revenue from which towns had been created, but the same villages were not provided amenities. V. Sbramaniam from Madras went to the extent of expressing that "If there is any living cell in the Constitution, it will be this village panchayats amendment which has brought forward".

Satyanarayan Sinha from Bihar stood up to move for the closure of the discussion after the speech of L. Krishnaswami Bharathi from Madras. Bharathi's speech makes an interesting reading in two ways. First, it suggested that members of the Assembly had taken the task as seriously as the nature of the work demanded. Second, it seemed to be the culmination of all discussion that had taken place by rooting the argument in the exact thoughts of Gandhi. It also implicated the idea of empowerment as reflected in the thoughts of Gandhi. Bharathi pointed out that Gandhi emphasized that political and economic decentralization was indispensable for the functioning of democracy. At this moment K. Santhanam interrupted Bharathi and pointed out that self-government might be as much economic and spiritual as it was political. Bharathi responded by saying that he was aware of these dimensions of decentralisation, but wished to enlighten the members by making it clearer. He then pointed out that for Gandhi self-sufficiency was central in the concept of self-government and quoted Gandhi thus "My idea of village Swaraj is that it is complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary". After quoting Gandhi's notion of village Swaraj, Bharathi elaborated and interpreted Gandhi's ideas thus

Gandhiji was emphatic in saying that he was not at all suggesting that the village should be independent of all these things, but in certain matters you must have self-reliance, the basic idea being, “*no work, no food*”. Now the villagers think that as it is a Swaraj Government, *khadi* and food will flow from heavens as *manna*. Gandhi’s idea in this self-sufficiency is, “Don’t expect anything from the Government. You have got your hands and feet; work; without work you will have no food. You can produce your own cloth, you can produce your own food. But if you do not work, you shall have no food, no cloth”. That is the basic idea of decentralisation and economic democracy.

After saying all this Bharathi quoted Gandhi at length elaborating the idea of village swaraj. He completed his speech by quoting from Gandhi the following views on village panchayats: “...There will be a compulsory service of village guards who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female possessing minimum prescribed qualifications”. He concluded his speech by saying that for Gandhi ‘India could live only if the villages live’. Immediately after that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, “Sir, as I accept the amendment, I have nothing more to add”. The Vice-President commented that all these speeches were nothing except praising the amendment and then he moved the amendment which was passed and the Article 31-A was added to the Constitution on November 22, 1948.

II. Third Reading

On November 17, 1949, the third reading of the Draft Constitution began. As a matter of fact, the third reading did not implicate specific articles for debate, comments and inclusion in the final draft. It began with the resolution moved by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that the revised draft should be passed by the Assembly. In response to the resolution a large number of members made general and sometimes specific observations on the Draft Constitution. Again village figured in some of the speeches of the members.

It was improbable to foresee that village could be a matter of contention in the making of Constitution, but it turned out to be crucial for some members due to the influence of Gandhi. It was not expected that the members of the House would spare time after village panchayat was made part of the constitutional necessity. However, when the third reading began the significance of village in India was consistently emphasised by many members. The first speaker in this regard was H. V. Kamath, who gave a suitable attention to the issue of village when he rose to speak on November 19, 1949 as the first speaker of the day. Any mention of village in the House was expected to be the critique of Ambedkar’s views on village. Kamath did the expected when he turned to the question of village. He said, “Dr. Ambedkar at first stigmatised the villages as senks [sic.] of superstition and ignorance or something like that, it is good that we embodied in the Directive Principles the salutary provision for village panchayats”. Arun Chandra Guha from West Bengal expressed his displeasure over the little attention paid to villages in the Constitution ((November 21, 1949). Syamanandan Sahaya from Bihar was also unhappy with the coverage village got in the Constitution. He said, “I feel that

in the matter of framing the constitution we have superimposed a Constitution from above and have not made a real effort to start from village life. This matter, as we remember, formed the subject of an important discussion in this House and I must admit that for once and for the first time I thought that Dr. Ambedkar was not only in the wrong but very much in the wrong” (November 22, 1949). Upendranath Barman from West Bengal argued for the immediate formation of village panchayats and the transfer of power to them and opined that ‘many of the problems of governing this country will be solved’.

Next day on November 23, 1949, B. P. Jhunjhunwala from Bihar focused more on the issue of village than any other matter in his speech. He began his comment on the village by criticising the centralisation of power. He said,

Sir, I do not believe in the theory propounded here that everything should be centralised and that the whole country should be governed from the Centre. But I agree that powers should be given to the Centre so that in times of emergency they can be utilised for the benefit of the people. Sir, the Centre should have only such power as is necessary and cannot be exercised by its component governing parts, for the preservation of the unity and integration of the whole of India. Every other power should be, as much as possible, decentralised and given to the unit of village or groups of villages what to say Province. With that purpose in view, I had given notice of an amendment to the Preamble that ‘after the word “Republic” the words “to be worked on the basis of autonomous village Units or groups of villages organised on the principle of self-sufficiency as far as practical” be added.

The above view was stated to be in accordance with Gandhian values – an idea of self-sufficient village as unit of governance and self-rule. After suggesting the needed amendment of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, Jhunjhunwala went on to quote most of the speech on the village delivered by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar when he moved the Draft Constitution for debate on November 4, 1948. After reading Ambedkar’s views on village, he said, “Nothing can be more uncharitable and unjust to the villagers than what Dr. Ambedkar has said”. Same day Dip Narayan Sinha from Bihar emphasised the importance of Indian villages as the custodians of the civilisation, whereas most of the countries of the world are turning to the cities.

O. V. Alagesan from Madras was the last speaker to mention the issue of village at length and after him village did not figure in the speeches of the members. He also tended to respond to those members’ views who thought that village had not been adequately covered in the Constitution. He said, “What was conceived under the village unit system was that the village voters would be called upon to elect the Panchayats and only the members of the Panchayats were to take part in the elections to the various assemblies, Provincial and Central. But now, it is the village voter himself who will be called upon to weigh the issues before the country and elect his representative, and so he will directly participate in the election” (November 24, 1949). He regarded the adopted method more progressive than the indirect way of electing the state and central leaders.

III. Ambedkar and Manu

The Third Reading of the Constitution began on November 17, 1949 and concluded on 26th November with the speech of the President of the Constituent Assembly. After this the House was convened on January 24, 1950 to sign the Constitution. The task that was initiated on December 9, 1946 was accomplished three years later. There are three interesting aspects of what the members said in the House. The first dimension is the commentary on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar - the chief architect of the Constitution. The second is the speech of Ambedkar in response to the speeches of members in the Third Reading. The third dimension is the speech of the President and final signing of the Constitution.

The episteme underlying the commentary on Ambedkar could be characterised as unchanged perspective on social structure in such a way that even the modernity is connected with the logic of the tradition. H. J. Khandekar was the first speaker to touch upon the issue with the argument that as a Dalit he was aware of the conditions of the untouchables. He said,

..... This country was being governed for ages together by the law of Manu and you know, Sir, what are the effects of this law on this country. Varnas were created, castes within castes formed and even one caste could not see the face of other caste. The untouchables according to the law of Manu were to go and settle outside a village or a town and that too in the east..... If I may do so, Sir, I call this Constitution the Mahar law because Dr. Ambedkar is Mahar.... (November 21, 1949).

The above quote was the first comment made on Ambedkar by comparing him with Manu – the law giver of the ancient Indian society. Khandekar condemned Manu and praised Ambedkar. On the same day, S. M. Ghose responded to Khandekar's comments and his comments could be symbolising the Hindu conception of social reality. He said,

I have heard in this Assembly something about Manu which I consider is not a proper understanding of what Manu stands for or what Manu really means. Speaking about Dr. Ambedkar an honourable member was pleased to say that he was not a Manu but a Mahar giving us law. But there is no knowing whether Manu belonged to the Brahmin or the Mahar caste. But Manu represents a conception of Indian people – an ideal of law given for humanity. In that sense Dr. Ambedkar was rightly called the Manu of the present age. It is not that anybody who is in charge of making law really makes anything, but he simplifies and codifies the law seen by *rishidrishti*, i. e., seen by intuition. In that sense, whether a man comes from Mahar community or Brahmin community or any other community, if he has that intuition, if he could see and codify things not only for his community, not as his community views things, but for the whole of humanity, he will be rightly called Manu.

The reference to Manu had occurred earlier, but giving Ambedkar the title of Manu was something that occurred for the first time. The novelty of the argument was the construction of Manu as a generic concept according to which the person who codifies law gets the status of Manu. As the third reading was coming to closure, adulations began to pour on Ambedkar and

reference to Manu became a natural corollary. On November 24, 1949, K. M. Jedhe was the next to mention Ambedkar and Manu in a critical way. Jedhe pointed out that many members were congratulating Ambedkar and were calling him Manu. He opined that Ambedkar might have been appalled by this title, for he hated Manu for creating Varnas. He said, “I remember that he has publicly burnt Manu Smrithi in the huge meeting of untouchables at Mohad in 1929”.

However, nothing prevented Hargovind Pant from United Provinces from philosophising how Ambedkar could be deservedly called Manu. He began his speech by saying that “I have come here to support the motion of Pandit Ambedkar”. He pointed out that he was using the epithet ‘Pandit’ as he was a great scholar. He then clarified why some members were giving Ambedkar the title of ‘Manu Bhagwan’. It is interesting to quote him thus “We are passing through the twenty eight cycle of *Vaivashawat*, the Seventh Manu. To bring in a new Manu in this chain may perhaps create a difficulty. Therefore I think that the title of *Up-manu* and not the Manu can be conferred on him”.

IV. Village as Metaphor of Unfinished Project: By Way of Conclusion

The day Ambedkar delivered the historic speech to move draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly was the day of the paradigmatic shift in the way India was imagined, understood and defined as civilization, nation and society. Village, the foundation of Gandhian thought, crumbled under the weight of a new modernity to which the Gandhians reacted sharply. Ambedkar could have avoided mentioning village, but he chose to do so because he created a dichotomy/binary opposition of village and individual³. What did it mean? It meant the breakdown of the archaic and oppressive system of living in communities founded on the village settlement where all kinds of discriminations perpetuated. By making the individual as the unit of citizenship, the so-called unbreakable shell of village community was broken.

Ambedkar was not the only one to treat village as the den of darkness and oppression and the only remedy to come out of it was to break it. Marx (1975) pinpointed village is the foundation of unchanging character of Indian villages. The causal relationship established by the 19th century sociologists between population increase and social change mediated through the change of division of labour constituted an exception in India. Marx (ibid.) argued that the population increase of the Indian village did not lead to the emergence of new division of labour. On the other hand, the surplus population moved out of the village and established a new settlement which was the replica of the original village without changing property relations – the reason Marx regarded the British colonialism as good for Indian society.

Ambedkar’s comments on Indian village in his speech were a part his writing on the village. He dealt with the notion of Indian village in contradistinction to its colonial construction. He (Rodrigues 2002: 325 – 326) argued that “the Indian village is not a single social unit. It consists of castes”. He made a binary opposition of touchables and untouchables who differ in terms of their location with regard to social status, residential locations, political status and economic conditions. Ambedkar (ibid.) identified fifteen offences which the untouchable must not commit in his conduct with the touchable castes. He

concluded his essay with the following: “In this republic, there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a republic” (ibid.: 330).

Dumont (2002:50) rejected Maine’s characterisation of Indian village as little republics and almost agreed with Ambedkar’s characterisation thus “The truth is that Maine carried on the approach inaugurated in *Ancient Law*, arbitrarily abstracting his ‘Community’ from the data and reducing it to those features which, he assumed, were characteristic of the pristine Indo-European community. He did away with caste and kinship with a leger de main, just as he did not feel the need for any detailed and localized description”. Dumont’s remark is obviously implicating caste and kinship as antinomy of community in which homogeneity rather than heterogeneity is the principle. In this regard, the village India resembled its construction Ambedkar made. Gandhians, on the other hand, failed to apprehend the deep philosophical construction which Gandhi made of village as the ideal site. When he told Nehru, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, that the village he was referring to was residing in his imagination, he was essentially looking at future where the contradictions and darkness of the present would be absent.

To what extent Ambedkar’s unintended appreciation for the city could be regarded as justified is a matter of empirical investigation and some attempt in this direction would be made here. However, it is clear that Ambedkar’s vision of modernity was linked with the end of communities and emergence of society where anonymity of the individual’s birth-based status would be the dominant feature of social life. Sociological studies show that the urban localities are caste-centric in considerable cases as well as class-centric. Judge and Bal (2005), Bhosale (2003) and Sharma (2003) have shown how the Dalit localities exist in cities. Virtually all over India caste associations are active in cities. Mumbai, being the major metropolitan cities with its distinct urban character, has all kinds of indicators of the existence of caste, regional and religious associations. Certain localities have emerged purely on the criterion of caste, religion or region where all others are not allowed to reside⁴. Thus the issue of modernity in the case of India decentres the notion of village as a symbol of Indian backwardness in terms of its practice of discrimination and exclusion in certain respects.

Therefore, village is a metaphor in the writings of Gandhi and Ambedkar where the two are opposite to each other. Metaphors, it may be reminded, are vague and ambiguous. Gandhi’s ambiguity has resulted from his imagination, whereas Ambedkar’s ambiguity is existential and also based on his experience of living in the Western countries as well as in Mumbai. For Gandhi the village of his imagination was the ideal locality without dirt and hatred. Gandhi’s views had great appeal and his village of imagination was thought to be the village in reality by his staunch followers. The imaginary village of Gandhi became the ideal site – a metaphor of what signified ideal Indian village. Ambedkar sought to end community and make individual as the unit of citizenship and the first community that he touched upon was ‘village’. When he delivered his speech in the Constituent Assembly, the decisions to discontinue separate electorate and any reservations on religious basis had left for Ambedkar only the Indian village – the metaphor of darkness.

Village could become the important element in imagining India as nation was one of the strangest occurrences in the construction of postcolonial modernity. Ambedkar was obviously right about villages, but most of the people of the country were living in villages and still it is so. Gandhi had made a powerful impact on the minds of a section of the Congress leaders. Village was added to the nationalist imagining as a nation-building process. The debate on village forms the most crucial element in the Gandhian rationality of opposition to the colonial rule. The British came with the package – economic, cultural, social and political. Gandhi created a reverse cultural order as a part of his opposition to what symbolised the colonial rule. In opposition to the urban-industrial world of the capitalism, Gandhi found village and cottage industry with a non-consumerist living as the rightful answer to the Western hegemonic domination.

I would like to conclude my lecture by precisely commenting on the observations of some of the members of the Constituent assembly giving Ambedkar the title of Manu – the lawgiver of the ancient Hindu society. Such a title is both irony and metaphor. One may strangely feel it awkward to hear that the person who was against Manu and *Manusmriti* and regarded the same as responsible for caste system is being given such an “honour”. As a metaphor it may be treated as an acknowledgement to the contribution of a scholar who singlehandedly drafted the constitution and defended its various articles in the debates. It seemed that he had no parallel in the history of India, for unlike Greek city states where one encounters Solon and many other lawgivers, there has been no history of writing the Constitution in India. Thus only Manu was left in the ancient Indian tradition.

Notes

1. Interestingly, it is Henry Man instead of Henry Maine in the English text.
2. It may be of interest to sociologists in particular that Emile Durkheim reviewed Baden-Powell’ book *The Village Communities in India* in 1897 and thought that its ‘joint family is by far the more ancient form’ (Dumont 2002: 50).
3. In sociology, the dichotomy of village/city or rural/urban is quite popular in comparing forms of society and/or way of life.
4. Observation is based on author’s field work in Mumbai.

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(It is important to mention that all quotations and references from the debates of the Constituent Assembly have been mentioned in terms of the dates instead of page numbers)

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