


COLLECTED PAPERS ON SOUTH ASIA NO. 5

# RURAL SOUTH ASIA

*LINKAGES, CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT*

*Edited by*  
PETER ROBB



CENTRE OF SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES  
SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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## PREFACE

This volume results from an international symposium which I organized in December 1980 under the auspices of the Centre of South Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Further papers from the same symposium and an earlier meeting in June are being published separately under the title *Rural India: Land, Power and Society under British Rule* (Collected Papers on South Asia No.6).

The present book comprises those contributions which bore particularly on questions of change in relation to economic development. The intention is to concentrate on linkages between localities and the outside world, and in general between what may be defined as intrinsic to a given society and what may be called external. The essays are illustrative of the subject; this volume does not pretend to be a survey and has no pretensions to being regionally or thematically comprehensive. Four papers, those by Eric Meyer, Nurit Bird, Gyan Pandey and Dick Kooiman, examine the response of South Asian societies specifically to the introduction of 'modern' features of production: plantations, foreign imports or capitalist industry. Four more papers treat aspects of external linkages in particular relation to economic development: that by Walter Neale on the role of the money-lender as 'culture broker', that by H.G. Hanumappa and John Adam on the physical communication between villagers and nearby towns, and those of Ghan-shyam Shah and Paul Brass on recent development efforts and different responses to technological advances.

The conference and therefore this publication would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the Projects Committee at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and that assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

The presentation of the papers has been standardized to a point but absolute uniformity has not been attempted. The use of italics has been avoided as far as possible, for example after the first appearance of less common but repeated words. A problem arises with transliteration where words are or were current in Anglo-Indian usage (in English): to apply strict conventions to such words is to give them a misleading 'indigenous' quality. I have therefore left all transliterated words in the forms used by the different authors.

P.G.R.

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INTRODUCTION:  
THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION IN RURAL SOUTH ASIA

*Peter Robb*

The symposium from which this volume is drawn had the title 'The external dimension in rural South Asia: linkages between localities and the wider world'. It was concerned to focus attention on processes of integration and exchange between the levels of government, central markets or regional and metropolitan culture, and the level of the villages of South Asia. The essays which follow treat aspects of these questions in their own way. Several continuing themes may be discerned. First there are methodological points. The papers show a clear preference for making assessments according to function rather than form, and on the basis of a complex of roles or a society in the round. As a consequence two general conclusions seem possible: that the 'traditional' systems may not be seen as a set of hierarchical isolates, for linkages of various sorts are not peculiar to so-called modern societies, and that the categories of our analysis - such as 'political', 'social' and 'economic' - are misleading because Eurocentric, conjuring up distinctions and divisions which do not exist in South Asia. Divisions there are, of course, but the categories which they provide are mostly hybrids ('socio-political', 'socio-economic' and so on) according to our terminology. Secondly the papers provide some substantive hypotheses. They recognise that communities differ in their response to stimuli, that in general adaptation is preferred to transformation, and that imperfect linkages are an important inhibitor of or barrier to change.

We may dispose of the methodological points first. The paper by Neale encapsulates them: he examines the moneylender, by which he means the 'external' bania visiting the villages to trade, according to his function and not his reputation, as a broker mediating between different economic cultures, and he stresses that the bania did not operate wholly in the economic sphere or seek economic rewards above all others. The more detailed papers embody similar ideas. Hanumappa and Adam stress the variety of relationships and the multiplicity of function for institutions and actions in the villages they study. Meyer, on Sri Lanka, begins by trying to understand the traditional ecosystem, and thus abandons the idea of static or closed villages which was

implicit in accounts of areas of perpetual cultivation and permanent occupations: he sees the interplay between 'outfield' reserves of land and 'infield' paddy fields and gardens. Nurit Bird, too, stresses the pattern of work, consumption and trade in the life of the food-gatherers before they became involved with labour on a plantation, and Pandey pushes back in time the market-involvement and dependence on intermediaries of the weavers he studies, while also judging the impact of trade in manufactured goods in terms of the rural economy as a whole. Kooiman adopts Neale's strategy in analysing the functions of the 'jobber' who provided labour for the Bombay mills in terms of the services he provided. Shah's essay exemplifies the discontinuity between rhetoric and practice, between the Gandhian 'decentralization' which he sees as yet another in the series of strategies intended to defend the supposedly isolated village from outside influence on the one hand, and the practical needs of and constraints upon development agencies or the desires and expectations of local people on the other hand. Brass's questions too are very much of the genre 'how does it work?' in preference for 'how does it look?'; his explanations of the relative failure to improve rice yields in Bihar depend upon the connexion between agricultural profitability and ecological constraints, especially problems of water management.

The studies thus tend to emphasize pre-existing conditions and often enough resistance to change. To Meyer the essential feature maintaining the balance of the society was the flexibility provided by chena cultivation, that is, occasional crops of paddy and millets on so-called waste land. This was destroyed by plantations, land-grabbing and government policy. The villager's response was to substitute other sources of income and flexibility, for example by opening his own plantation or more commonly by trading with or working for the Europeans with their Tamil labour force. Bird's tribals, similarly, take from the plantation, its wages and the market, those features which best suit their previous life-style. Pandey's weavers, too, fit into established patterns. Pandey, anxious to distinguish between the impact of British trade on different sections of the population, argues that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries even lowly textile producers were already involved with entrepreneurs who captured most of the profits, and that the fortunes of different production centres fluctuated even then from time to time.



Thus Pandey sees the loans and advances made under the East India Company and to a lesser extent the subsequent rise and fall of weaving communities as partially continuing the past: the region and its trade were already open to whatever damage was inflicted on them by the advent of European manufactures. Moreover, faced with the challenge, people did not suddenly change their habits: factory-products could be readily substituted for most of the finer qualities of cloth but not for coarser handloom (the demand for which continued into the present century), and local manufacturers of fine cloth attempted to save themselves by cornering the market wherever imports could not compete, and ultimately in cotton saris for local sale.

A second conclusion is that adjustment is usually preferred to revolution. Kooiman's jobbers were newcomers, urban-based, dependent for their position on knowledge and physical strength. To the employers they were both contractors for and managers of labour. But to the workers they were patrons, the 'mukadam' or traditional leaders. They were not of the village but they were from it, in the sense of recruiting through kinship and common origins and of reproducing, in the factory, conditions which accommodated to the understanding of the villagers. They were recipients of bribes or tributes; they were creators of vertical solidarity. Just as the mill-owner abrogated to the jobber the right to hire and fire, so the workers gave up any pretensions of entering a wage contract or combining as a class. The jobber was, in short, a culture-broker in the sense that Neale uses the term: he provided for capitalist enterprise a 'non-capitalist' face in the villages, and for the worker both a channel and a filter. Meyer's villagers required different aptitudes to meet the challenge of the plantations and therefore there was some change in the people who were successful, but none the less their involvement with a capitalist system may be represented merely as the substitution of one outfield for another; its function for the village had not changed, and therefore the underlying structure remained the same. Bird makes this explicit with the notion of 'pre-existing pattern' by which she accounts for the continuities to be found in the customs of the Naikens, and which may be seen to be the equivalent of the cultural conservatism described in all the papers. In stressing the importance of function, Bird reminds us, as Neale does also, that social, economic and other features do not exist independently of the uses to which they are put

and the ways they are perceived. Integration with the plantation or the money economy did not imply for a Naiken what it would imply to a North American: Bird's concept of 'wage-gathering' is thus not paradoxical, because she does not understand wages to imply the system of values and customs which surrounds their payment in some other societies, but rather sees them as an objective feature whose functions are peculiar to the society in which they occur. For the Naiken indeed the wage is not a currency at all - that role is filled by debt - but a substitute for forest-products, and it is gathered when needed just as they were in the past.

The dynamic element in these explanations is also important, and central to some of the papers. Change, it is clear, is not a necessary consequence of contact, for contact of some sort is a perennial feature. Change is a necessary consequence of the right mix between an innovative contact and a receptive society, or between internal needs and pressures and an appropriate input. The extent to which defence is possible, as in the substitution practised by Meyer's villagers, Bird's tribals and Pandey's weavers, depends on the ability to accommodate a change of content within existing structures, and that will depend, for example, on the degree to which the 'outfield's' characteristics are or are not peripheral, and in general on the nature of pre-existing arrangements. The Naikens did not 'develop', because the plantation represented a change with which they could cope, and also because they were not predisposed to seize upon the opportunities for economic maximization which it could have provided. Pandey's weavers were protected to some extent not by isolation but by the persistence of old tastes, the inappropriateness of some of the finer cloths for some of the consumers, and most of all by the continuing need for surplus income and the opportunities provided as an adjunct to cotton-growing. Indeed the claim is that weavers had probably always operated at or about subsistence level and that the true losers to foreign competition were probably those agriculturists who needed to supplement inadequate incomes from cultivation; they substituted migration. On the other hand, the weavers in some communities were not disposed to change their ways by producing in factories, even though they had long been involved in the market and dependent on middle-men. Here, I think, and in contrast with Kooiman, the 'de-industrialization' argument runs into difficulties. Arguably change would become endemic rather than epidemic, at the point at

which intolerable conflict arose between the weavers' self-image and sense of identity, and the conditions with which they had to fit in. So too the half-way house represented by the jobbing system discussed by Kooiman is possible precisely because such a crisis had not occurred: the village may have been 'subordinated' to the factory but if so it was not because of the dominance of the capitalist mode of production but in the sense that villages were made to serve certain purposes for the mills, chiefly as labour pools; and indeed, on the contrary, the existence of the jobbers rendered the mills imperfectly 'capitalist', prevented them from undermining village society, and even perhaps caused them to perpetuate existing social relations.

In seeking fuller explanations of dynamic processes, these papers look first at the linkages themselves. Neale argues that the lack of suitable brokerage may have rendered ineffective some attempts at modernization and development. Hanumappa and Adam, concerned to analyse the 'hiatus between ... infrastructure and ... village structure', believe external connexions to be instrumental in development. Their two examples, one 'growing' and one 'declining' village, admit of differences of opportunity (proximity to towns, availability of water) but suggest that these are not sufficient explanations of the differences of performance. Rather the range and nature of outside movements may be correlated with the economic position of the villages and of individuals within them. The differences may have had underlying causes, as for example in the caste composition of the villages, one of which had a large number of tribals and the other a large number of the locally-dominant caste; but however the differences in receptivity originate they are, it is claimed, instrumental in development or decline. Other essays too take up this point by looking beyond the substitution and adaptation which we have seen as the initial reaction of non-receptive communities. Kooiman sees the adjustment represented by the jobber as a transitional arrangement: the interchange occurred at first without any concurrence of customs or attitudes between the parties, and the worker remained migratory, attached to his village which he sought to re-create as far as possible in the unsanitary chawls where he preferred to live: but, as the discussion of trade union development shows, this worker could be harnessed through the jobber into new forms of association, and vertical solidarity could be translated into without being superseded by horizontal

mobilization. The fact that 'pre-existing patterns' are not at first disturbed does not mean that fundamental changes never come, merely that they are delayed. Kooiman's jobbers came to need or to want what outsiders could offer them, the political brokerage of administrative skills and the articulation of grievances in a political idiom; ultimately the jobber and the village could be superseded, by means of the linkages which were in existence or created.

Shah's account leads in the same direction. He shows how a development agency is dependent on external forces however committed it may be to internal uplift. The need for capital formation and certain political pressures invite centralization; but more than this much of the response to the external which distorted the Gandhian ideals was derived from the local people themselves. When the agency tried to emphasize agriculture and crafts in their school they found people demanding English and science, as vehicles for an escape from the status of manual workers and farmers. Cooperative preparation of papad, a vegetable product, flourished because it provided jobs for women who would not work in the fields, but its commercialization offended the Gandhians. The picture is of a tension between internal and external forces, certainly, because the development workers were unable to change the pattern of land-holding, the customs and attitudes which created local conditions, or the decisions of governments and aid programmes which provided the external inputs: thus the technocratic improvements evoked a ready response but were not to the advantage of small and marginal farmers, while the development of the dairy industry, diamond-cutting and paper-manufacture was dependent on the demands of external trade. But the picture is also of a tension that is being resolved, for Shah concludes that internal resistance has weakened as the external forces, particularly integration with the market, become stronger. The Gandhian ideals were first compromised and then rejected: so this agreeably sardonic essay reveals.

Such arguments have wide ramifications, for Gandhi's view of the Indian village was not an original one. Many years ago Daniel Thorner, in an appreciation of Henry Maine, remarked that his 'ideas may have been modified in a number of respects but they are very far from having been completely disproved or entirely displaced',<sup>1</sup> and this is still true, not just among Gandhians but generally. The essays in this volume however belong to a trend which has brought displacement nearer.

Criticisms of Maine's egalitarian *ur*-community and of single-line evolution have been well-digested, but the present tendency is also to question the extent to which village structure was, in pre-modern conditions, largely or essentially unaffected by outside influence, or that communities were 'left to modify themselves separately'.<sup>2</sup> There is little autochthonous development to be found in the pages of this volume, and also little sense that the character (as opposed to the extent) of the most important exchanges between the village and its environment has altered in the dramatic sense in which Maine believed. It is true that in an essay which was before our symposium but which has been published elsewhere, Gilbert Etienne rejected the 'village republic' ideal on the basis of the lack of dynamism in the model, arguing that any system of production has its 'inner rationale' so that there comes a time when its 'maximum productivity has been reached'.<sup>3</sup> But this rationale so far as it is reflected in this volume seems to be the result of exchanges between external and internal conditions: it is itself a source of the dynamic, for conditions are constantly changing. Etienne proposed population pressure as an example (perhaps *the* example) of the crisis that generates advances in technology and a change in the system of production, or else leads to some catastrophe which preserves the existing system by a demographic check. But other essays suggest that change may result or be avoided through a range of influences, at once wider than this because reflecting the ways in which the village is embedded in its environment, and narrower because specific to each case.

We are groping then towards a fundamental explanation of historical change. We appear to accept the pre-eminence of ecology over culture without denying the resilience of the latter. It is after all only as a theoretical construct that we see behaviour resulting merely from man's accommodation to physical conditions, that we attribute entire social structures to pre-determined responses, in the way that the origins of *bhaia-chara* communities have been traced to insecure agri-culture.<sup>4</sup> The last paper in the collection makes this point clearly. Brass denies that lack of enterprise explains the failure to increase the productivity of rice cultivation in north and east India, and refers instead to problems which specifically affect paddy in many parts of Asia. The peasant, to Brass, is a rational producer who rejects the additional input required for high-yield varieties in situations of high

climatic risk. But Brass does not ignore cultural explanations altogether. He emphasizes the importance of understanding ecological *and* human factors; and in the cultural sphere he notices particularly the impact on goals of a farming system geared to subsistence and not marketing. The size of holding is an important factor here, as is the ability to enjoy surplus, but so too are cultural preferences, though none of these is immutable. Indeed diversity is a theme for Brass and others.

In treating particular examples the papers in this volume have thus, it seems to me, some common conclusions. I shall attempt here to expand upon these points, to relate them to the questions with which we began, and to assess their significance. The interpretation will be my own, but based on the aspects of the papers already described. When I was asked to clarify the starting-point for our discussions, I explained that I sought a range of factors likely to be significant, mechanisms likely to operate, characteristics receptive or hostile, where there is externally-induced change. It seemed necessary to ask how internal and external worlds relate in general, to encompass continuity as well as change. There were two different kinds of question. The first was one of definition, which is, in South Asia, peculiarly complicated by point of view and assumptions: variations and contradictions present more than the familiar problem of deciding what is general and what is specific. We have to distinguish between reality and rhetoric. We can, for example, easily see the difference between varna theory and the practical operation of a jati. But how can we be certain that we are not, in our analyses of rural society, merely repeating the equivalent of a Brahmanical view? Moreover we cannot escape our definitions: our terminology must be general to the extent that we wish to communicate with others and relate our findings to theirs. In the last century the drawing of the boundaries depended upon certain preoccupations about society, evolution and race: thus we had tribes and castes as the imposed categories of analysis. Today we see that all the boundaries - the very study of ethnography, the idea of locality or the identification of a region - depend upon distinctions as difficult and arbitrary as those which historians have long worried about in the case of periodization.

Our first problem therefore was to describe and delineate externality and internality. We might, for example, map out the extent of operable relationships, find out how far regional influences extend, how wide

are the networks within which a village is placed, and which aspects of life are subject to the general trend and which to particular variation. These are in the last resort questions of fact. The second problem, however, concerned interrelation - not just the identification of a shift in the external environment to which internal change might be a response, but the interaction of one culture with another or between general and specific aspects of a single culture. The interface between internal and external is a point of movement, of exchange and causation, whether we are analysing change or stability, for the first results from exchanges which tend to subvert and the other from exchanges which tend to confirm. And here the questions (what mechanisms determine which it is to be?) were wholly ones of interpretation. The problem goes deeper than merely choosing one or even a set of 'causes' when all seems interdependent. If there is no road, except the examination of the particular case, along which to seek the relative importance of factors that were generating or resisting change, it is a road that leads into familiar cul-de-sacs. It is agreed, perhaps, that change and continuity result from a mix of internal conditions and external environment. Go beyond this assumption, to questions about what the mix is likely to be, and agreement ends. We may see this in development terms: at some stage sufficient of either incentive or opportunity will induce change, but it is difficult to define the sufficiency. Just as we ask at what point lack of incentive will be overwhelmed by magnitude of opportunity, we have to consider when it is that internal forces are sufficiently favourable or external sufficiently dramatic, to induce change.

Hence it was that at the outset I asked for the independent examination of the ways things interact. Broadly speaking, are there kinds of institution which are resistant to change or kinds of influence which are bound to prevail? The inquiry had already moved on, therefore, from those old controversies about the nature of the village community which depended on the theoretical establishment of original forms in order to understand how relations 'ought' to be (before changing or protecting them). We were concerned rather with the terms on which various forms develop and decline, with what I made bold to call a 'systematic study of connexion'. It was not to be expected that any symposium would address itself wholly to the questions with which it began; but the essays presented here have, it seems

to me, consistently abandoned any idea of a kind of moral supremacy for past or original social forms, discarded indeed any idea of isolation in which a single original form could appear and be sustained over time, and turned instead to the roles played by various forces at any time, moving societies in different directions from diverse starting-points. Moreover, to my mind, the essays reinforce certain conclusions, in particular that change will be induced within a society either when influences are so strong as to produce an environmental revolution, in which case change may be said to be independent of the social or value system, or when influences are so appropriate as to be readily accepted, in which case change might be said to be dependent on the existing culture.

One lesson of the papers is thus that we ought to escape the obsession with the cultivator in his isolated village. A second lesson is that our terminology still needs attention, damaged as it is by the observation of how groups function and interact. The return of the peasant to South Asian history has been rightly hailed,<sup>5</sup> by a great and greatly lamented exponent of this trend, but sometimes it seems as if it is a nineteenth-century view of the peasant that has come back. The term may imply the isolated and independent subsistence producer who is so much at home in those isolated villages. But who is this peasant? Is he the small-holder of the Mali type who grows vegetables for a limited market? Is he the surplus cultivator whose attention quickly turns to those 'capitalist' activities of rent-collection and usury? The term supposes an equilibrium in landholding and land-use which perhaps did not exist, and a broad and important section of the population on which we should be concentrating our attention. A peasant role no doubt existed, but perhaps it was not wholly identified with a single group, differentiated internally only by relative wealth and independence.

Furthermore, we are led to ask whether or not this is the role on which we should concentrate if we are interested in change. An economy and equally a society or a polity depend (I would argue) upon connexion, and it may be seen (as suggested by Walter Neale in this volume) that there are two roles which may be played in this regard in the South Asian countryside. There is brokerage, whose importance depends on the ability to translate, to be different things to different men, and there is patronage, the key to which is the supply of necessities in return for services. The underlying



feature of the one is exchange, and of the other dominance or dependence. Here too we have to attend to the role and not a type or an individual. The money-lender who takes coin from the town and makes it available to the cultivator (for rent or revenue-payments) is acting as a broker. He may also be a patron if he supplies seed and food grains in return for control over the disposal and sharing of the harvest. The prosperous cultivator who lends cash or grain or draught animals to his fellow-cultivators, in return for their labour in his holdings, is also performing either or both of these roles. Our analysis of connexion therefore depends not on the use of categories such as *bania*, dominant peasant or *zamindar*, but on examination of the impact and operation of those who performed certain roles, regardless of their status.

These observations lead us on, or so it seems to me, to those further lessons about the nature of change already discussed. Our conclusions may be taken as representing a new stage, in contrast with some of those of the past. Not just in recent discussions but since the debates of the nineteenth century, 'colonialism' has cast a long shadow over 'development'.<sup>6</sup> Thus are postulated indigenous structures and external forces, the latter seen as having penetrated the former.<sup>7</sup> Such interpretations inhibit understanding, for in their Eurocentrism they imply a whole series of further conclusions: that movement comes from outside not just in the sense argued here but in the sense of across continents and cultures, and that internal or indigenous features are bound to be weaker than external or foreign ones, a weakness that results from isolation and segmentation, a strength that is attained and transmitted through improved communication. Refinements of these ideas - Furnivall's pluralism or Boeck's dual economy<sup>8</sup> - have tended merely to add sophistication to the old dichotomy between East and West, fatalism and rationalism, sufferers and actors. So too Marx bequeathed to his followers an imprecise but potent image of backward Asia: of primitive communism, a despotic political and social system derived from communal property; of isolated communities where all divisions of labour (and those into producers and controllers) were unalterably fixed, in stasis, for want of class conflict; of a milieu in which production for consumption prevailed over production for wealth, only the latter demand being insatiable and thus dynamic. Nineteenth-century debates and also some of those conducted more recently, are dominated by a model