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Utopian Village: Representation of the Rural in Indian Writing

Abstract:

Gandhi called on India to accord villages their proper place but what is the proper place for villages in the twenty-first century? Do we conceive of village life as a stage or phase in socio-economic development, from whence one might imagine progress to a city, and then a nation? How has the village in South Asia endured? How has the rural been appropriated by writers in India over the decades since Independence? What place does the rural have in South Asian modernist writing of the twentieth-century? These are some of the questions that drive attempted research article. In particular, the attempt is to look at Indian writing that emerged in and out of the colonial experience, and of the Gandhian politics of swaraj and village economics.

Keywords: *Gandhian, Swaraj, Rural, South Asian, Modernist writing, Nation, Indian writing, Twenty-first centuries*

Introduction:

If we want freedom . . . we will have to give the villages their proper place.

(Gandhi, Harijan, 1940; my emphasis)

Our contemporary academic investigations into the urban space and the city acknowledge the global mixing of the world into multicultural units ("megacities" characterized by the flow of immigrants, outsourced labour, amalgamated cash inflows and outflows, open foreign investment); present article refers to the village and the rural imaginary in twentieth century South Asian writing in English and translation. In particular, the attempt is look at Indian writing that emerged in and out of the colonial experience, and of the Gandhian politics of swaraj and village economics. In such writing, the agrestic and the rural promised the space for an organic sub continental interiority (both psychological and spatial), one that was to trenchantly rebut the colonialist, masculinist, and industrialist forces of capitalist modernity that swept the Indian subcontinent in the wake of the British empire.

II. Theorizing the Indian Rural:

Rural studies have figured prominently in sociological literature on the Indian subcontinent. British administrators of the nineteenth century pioneered scholarly investigations into villages in India: Baden-Powell wrote about autonomous self-sufficient villages; Sir Henry Maine developed a theory of primitive communism of property on the basis of his study of Indian villages; and Sir Charles Metcalfe (reformulating an idea that Thomas Munro first coined in 1806) famously wrote, in 1830, in a Minute for the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company: "India's village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution, but the village community remains the same. This union of village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India" (qtd. in Ludden, 161). This was a reading of India that came to influence Karl Marx greatly. The "static village" is, thus, a point made by almost all the scholars associated with the British Raj (Saraswati, "Project-Village India"). In contrast, post-Independence studies on the village in India tended in great part to be studies of caste and social stratification, and a host of British, American, and Indian scholars re-oriented the field towards understanding the village as a dynamic space of multiple internal and

external connections and associations. Prominent among these scholars were anthropologists and social scientists like F. G. Bailey, Kathleen Gough, William H. Newell, David G. Mandelbaum, G. Morris Carstairs, S.C. Dube, M.N. Srinivas, and N. K. Bose. Where former studies under the Raj tended to study villages according to people's relationship with the land and on the basis of prevailing systems of land ownership, tenure, and bequeathal, these later studies focused on the cultural life of villages: "the wisdom tradition, the value system, and the local ontology that has been handed down from times immemorial...[its] complex system of cultural structures identified with art and architecture, religion and specialized knowledge, human behaviour, environmental conditions, and so on" (Saraswati, "Project-Village India").

Writers in the Indian subcontinent have shown a strong tendency towards conceptualizing the rural and the village within the dichotomous paradigms of utopia and dystopia. Such representations consequently cast the village in idealized (pastoral) or in realist (counter-pastoral/dystopic) terms. We may focus on twentieth-century literature of India to examine representative texts from the country that rehearse configurations of the village along the lines of utopia/dystopia as well as urban/rural, and national/local, configurations that recent fiction from the subcontinent has disassembled through the construction of what may be called "rural heterotopia." The history and culture of the country make up vast internal sociocultural and religious diversity. This becomes particularly significant to an understanding of utopia: in India, utopian ideas emerged in twentieth-century literature largely as a result of Gandhian politics against British rule, and Gandhi's various ashrams across the country served as blueprints of the kind of political utopia he imagined within local villages. Such utopian communities, based on the principles of sarvodaya (the rise of all) and swaraj (self-rule), defied caste boundaries, sought to eschew the industrialism of the cities, and, by creating in the village a site for change and (nationalist) agency, provided the impetus to many writers to re-imagine a free new India. The village-centred writings of Premchand in Hindi and Raja Rao in English are good examples of the utopian impulse in early twentieth-century Indian writing.

Gandhi's manifesto *Hind Swaraj* (HS) was written during an inspired ten-day period between 13 and 22 November 1909, on board the ship *Kildonan Castle*, when he was returning from England to South Africa "after what proved to be an abortive lobbying mission to London" (Parel xiv). The epiphanic nature of HS was important to Gandhi, who consistently reiterated the salience of his treatise to the Indian nationalistic project and to his larger vision of collective living. In a letter to Nehru dated October 5, 1945, Gandhi affirms unequivocally:

I have said that I still stand by the system of Government envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*. These are not mere words. All the experience gained by me since 1908 when I wrote the booklet has confirmed the truth of my belief. . . . I am convinced if India is to attain true freedom, and through India the world also, then sooner or later, the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. (CW 81: 319)

An incredulous Nehru – arch-opponent and arch-admirer of Gandhi to his last days – wrote back, quite outraged:

I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and nonviolence. . . . A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent. (October 9, 1945, qtd. in appendix to HS 153)

While the salvos exchanged between India's two most charismatic leaders make for a fascinating study in themselves, it would be more interesting in tracing lines of intersection between Gandhi's critique of modernity, based on the bedrock of his vision of the village in India, and Leonard Woolf's critique of imperialism, emerging from his vision of the Ceylonese village, both spawning important trajectories of intellectual thought within the subcontinent regarding nationality, citizenship and the formation of individual and collective subjectivity. Gandhi insists on modernity's death, utopically presenting the village as a unit of collective survival, outlasting the apocalyptic telos of urban progress. He emphasized the crucial need for a re-reading of the village as a central trope in twentieth-century critiques of modernity, colonialism, and nationalism.

Gandhi's vision of utopian rural collectivity made for a powerful confluence with the contemporary struggle for independence from British domination, a confluence that was to inspire a host of writers in the early twentieth century in crafting their own critiques of the Empire and visions of an independent nation-state. Indeed, Srinivasa Iyengar called this burst of literary creativity in Indian

writing of the 1930s and 1940s "Gandhian literature" (271).

III. Utopian Village and Indian Writing:

The utopian mode dominated much early twentieth-century Indian writing that took its inspiration from Gandhian philosophy and the freedom movement. Gandhi's insistence on the relevance of rural life and his disavowal of the industrialism of the city, were part of a larger discourse of eschewing the nation-state model of Western politics, a model that Gandhi believed overemphasized similarity and commonality (on the basis of race/language/religion) and led to narrow, exclusionary grounds for imagining national collectivity. In contrast, Gandhian philosophy, tending towards anarchism, denounced the state as a necessary evil and argued for ethical self-regulation at the level of the individual and for small communities based on the principles of labour (service) and local production. Gandhi's nationalism was thus integrally tied in with the rural, and in his various ashrams, he attempted to recreate communities of people who volunteered their services for communal living. Through his concepts of trusteeship (the rich are trustees of their wealth for the good of all), and Panchayati Raj (the village as a central institution, with government by a consensus of leaders), Gandhi sought to develop a model for egalitarian governance that was very different from the centralised systems of the British and the Mughals before them. In this sense, his utopia was not simply a place of happiness arrived-at and guaranteed by a higher authority, but quite the opposite, for it entailed a disruption of the order that successive systems of colonial rule had normalized and made a fact of daily existence.

Gandhian ideas had considerable impact on Indian literatures and recast the nationalist struggle for independence from British rule as a project for gaining self-respect and for unearthing models for indigenous collective existence. Early twentieth century writing inspired by Gandhian idealism invariably emphasised tradition and history, creating august pedigrees for rural collectivity, and despite the contradictions and paradoxes of global modernity (or perhaps because of them) reinforced the salience of villages to the anticolonial struggle against British governance. To this utopian mode belong the *Swaraj*-centered writings of Gandhi in the early decades of the twentieth century and the Gandhi-inspired works of writers as diverse as Premchand ("The Holy Panchayat"; *Godaan* or *The Gift of a Cow*, 1936, Hindi/Urdu); R. K. Narayan (*Swami and Friends*, 1935) and Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*, 1938) in English, and post-Independence, Rahi Masoom Reza (*Adha-Gaon* or *A Village Divided*, 1966, Hindi/Urdu); Buddhadeva Guha (*Kojagar* or *The Bounty of the Goddess*, 1988) and Mahashweta Devi (*Titu Mir*, 1989) in Bengali; Kamala Markandaya (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 1955), Khushwant Singh (*Train to Pakistan*, 1956), and Attia Hossein (*Sunlight on a Broken Column*, 1961) in English. Despite many important differences in their visions, these writers produce an empathetic portrayal of rural realities on the subcontinent, creating out of the village a moving allegory for the nation and a homeland. Shocked by the excesses of the Partition, many of these writers evoke an ideal, pre-colonial, rural collectivity as a model for national solidarity and reconstruction. The impact of Gandhian ideals of labour (the making and wearing of khadi, a locally spun cloth) often features in the works prominently as a symbol of rural self-sufficiency. As Soumhya Venkatesan argues, "in early twentieth-century India are found a set of utopian ideas and actions around preindustrial material culture: the idealization of the producer and production process, the valorization of the craft or village manufacture, and the location of the 'real India' in its villages and craft heritage" (2009: 78-95.)

However, the dystopian mode constructed the village as an artefact of a feudal past no longer relevant to a modern or post-modern order, as an antithesis to urban centres of power and activity. In such a vision, villages become the sites for the competing hegemonies of feudal caste structures, mechanisms of colonial suppression. Such dystopic envisioning of the rural can be seen in the diverse writings of Shanta Rama Rau (*Remember the House*, 1956), Manohar Malgaonkar (*The Princes*, 1963; *A Bend in the Ganges*, 1964), Kamala Markandaya (*Two Virgins*, 1973) and Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*, 1995) (English), and Thoppil Meeran (*The Story of a Seaside Village*, 1998) (Tamil), where a disenchantment with the Gandhian vision of rural life merges with a recognition of the inadequacies of the Nehruvian paradigm for urban renewal as the way to national rebuilding. Again, despite many internal differences in idea and political position, these writings re-create within the rural space a powerful counter-discourse to the narratives and processes of national unification in which the village and the villager often become instrumentalized and subsumed. The utopia Rao constructs in *Kanthapura* is, in effect, a kind of homotopia where the imagining of home and nation bolsters a specific kind of dominant Hindu teleology: Sanskritized, textualized, and exclusionary. In that sense, *Kanthapura* is impelled both by a need to show the rise of India against British colonial rule and by the desire to create a new voice for Indian writing in English. Consequently, in many ways, Rao's

novel is caught between the twin pressures of imagining a muscular India resilient in the face of colonial domination on the one hand, and of presenting a new visage to Indian writing in English on the other. This results in a validation of the homotopian village now unified across the boundaries of caste, and of a vision of its Bildungsroman like awakening to self-consciousness along the lines of Gandhian swaraj. Such an idealist vision, along with the new lexical innovations Rao accomplishes by infusing into the Queen's English the modalities of his native tongue, Kannada, create a semiotically complex novel designed to represent new-age India ready for political and intellectual freedom from the British. And yet, it is a problematic narrative where the focus on a handful of Brahmin families and the erasure of non-Hindus from the allegorical national landscape substitute the homotopia of a majoritarian Hindu populace for the nationalist project.

Conclusion:

The discussion of Gandhi's politics and ideas about the materializable utopia helps reading emblematic of two divergent visions of the rural dominant in the literary imaginaries of the 1930s, the heyday of the anticolonial movement against British rule (Rao), and after Independence.

However, it deserves a mention that the post-Rushdie literary output in India, since the 1980s, has overwhelmingly favoured the urban and the city as the locus for understanding the place of the individual in a globalized world order. The policies of economic liberalization in 1990 in India spawned a host of writers who attempted to convey from their different vantage points across the world the experiences of the urban, metropolitan migrant whose bohemian subjectivity took him from New Delhi and Bombay to London and New York. Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, among many others, are writers who have focused in their fiction on predominantly urban milieus and the dislocations and contradictions of a new kind of global cosmopolitanism. In particular, such cosmopolitanism creates the city as the center of global attention; as Rushdie says:

If people ask me to describe what kind of writer I am, the most truthful description I can give is that I feel that I'm essentially an urban writer, that I'm a writer of the big city. And so I've spent most of my life thinking about big cities and what they are and what they do and how they work. (Lynch, "Salman Rushdie")

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