

## **The trials and tribulations of village ‘restudies’: Social change and anthropological knowledge in rural India<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article is an account of the inception, management and initial conclusions of a research project which ‘restudied’ three villages in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. These villages had been first studied in the 1950s by the British anthropologists F.G. Bailey, Adrian C. Mayer and David F. Pocock. The new research was to focus on the sociological conditions of life in these villages today and compare the results of the new surveys with the data from the 1950s. The material presented here also points to some of the strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncratic charms of ‘restudies’.

### **Introduction**

Adrian Mayer, who has had a lifelong interest in social change, approached the anthropology department at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London to ask if we might be interested in undertaking a ‘restudy’ of a village in India. Mayer had been conducting research in the village since the early part of the 1950s, some

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<sup>1</sup> This research introduced in this piece was funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ES/I02123X/1). I am grateful to Patricia Jeffery for collaborating on the project and for her support throughout. Chris Fuller, Johnny Parry and Susan Wadley encouraged the project into existence. Without the foresight, generosity and trust of Adrian Mayer and F.G. Bailey the project could not have happened. The Centre for Social Studies in Surat gave us a home in India, we are particularly grateful to Akash Acharya and his colleagues for that.

twenty years before I was born. He rightly emphasised the longitudinal nature of his field data, which, in no small measure, is reflection of his own longevity and vitality.

Mayer was born in 1922 and had taken the two-year diploma at the London School of Economics with Sir Raymond Firth, conducting research in Malabar in the 1940s (1952), before starting doctoral work in Fiji in 1950 (1963). Later, he held a research post in Australian National University with S.F. Nadel. During his time with Nadel, he started the research he now wanted me to ‘restudy’. The village at the centre of the study was called Jamgod. In 1955, Jamgod had a population of 912 and was located in the state of Madhya Bharat, which is now Madhya Pradesh, a few kilometres from the town of Dewas. Mayer had conducted 15 months of ethnographic research there between 1954 and 1956. At the end of this period in the field, he moved to a teaching post at SOAS, where he remained until retiring as Pro-Director in 1987.

In a remarkably open and forthright move, Mayer said that if the project took off then he would also provide personal support, as well as access to his field notes, diaries and photographic collection. All in all, this was a rather daunting proposition: Mayer had been a stalwart of the discipline, a long serving and loyal member of the SOAS, a rigorous fieldworker and an efficient and effective writer. In addition to numerous articles, the research in Jamgod resulted in the monograph *Caste and kinship in central India* (1960). This work was an important contribution to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, for many other reasons additional to its disarming clarity. The book directly influenced the thought of Louis Dumont – who refers to Mayer frequently in his *Homo hierarchicus* (1980).

At the time, and largely I think because of the way the history of the discipline is usually taught in the United Kingdom, I had not then read Mayer’s monograph (I did not admit that to him then). Old anthropology, for want of a better phrase, is generally not allowed to age well. There are exceptions of course, but shelf life tends to be short. It does not take too many years for fashionable idioms, neologisms and theories to appear dated and uncomfortably out of step with the mores and graces of the new

present. However, I have read and reread Mayer's book over the last few years. In the process, I slowly learned how to inhabit it and appreciate the style of scholarship and argument the text represents. Its characters became more familiar to me. Later, visiting the village provided images and sensations to accompany the distances and contours which structured his writing, all be these rather ghostly impressions.

At about the same time, I also learned more about Mayer's meticulous fieldwork and record-keeping practices. He had counted and measured the village, conducting surveys, and examined land records. He had taken copious notes and written summative reports. He has also kept a diary. In this, of course, he is not alone because these are the standard techniques used by many anthropologists. However, I think it fair to say that Mayer has an unusual capacity to remember and describe the world. He also, and clearly from an early age, had developed a similarly extraordinary approach to documentation and record-keeping. His archive is exact and tidy and, therefore, relatively accessible.

As an aside, I will take this opportunity to ask readers whether their own professional and research records are in a condition or order in which they could be sensibly read and understood by somebody else. Mayer must have invested a significant amount of time to create his meticulous archive. I can only say that this investment has paid generous dividends. Not only can other people access the material through indexes, headings and other reference guides, it is also the case that by producing the material in such a form Mayer himself got to know the material much better. In some ways, the structure of the archive is how he has come to remember the material. Not many people conduct or record research with posterity in mind, but such archives are becoming important sources of material for a world which, although not so distant in time, is actually no longer very easy to imagine.

In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, funding agencies are keen on producing archives of publically-funded research. Anthropologists have generally been reluctant to deposit their data in such archives. They argue that fieldnotes contain personal material which

cannot easily be anonymized. Archiving, they further argue, is a breach of the personal relations of trust built during fieldwork. While I have a sympathy with such arguments, and even more sympathy with those fearing the burden of time that creating an archive takes, it is the case that if anthropologists and other qualitative researchers do not archive their work it will most likely be forgotten. All archives contain silences of course, but it is increasingly probable that there will be an anthropological hole in the archives of the twenty-first century, the space being occupied by ‘big data’, or some variation thereof.

After some deliberation, I decided to take up Mayer’s invitation. However, in order to secure adequate funds for the project I also thought it best to enlarge the scope and to conduct other restudies parallel to Mayer’s. This would, I then reasoned, provide a comparative account and would allow us to examine different kinds of development trajectory and contrasting stories of social change, it would also allow us to think anew about methodology and the history of the British sociology of India, but those are topics for another time.

I had then been thinking about the modern history of the anthropology of India and had written a review of the work of David F. Pocock with Johnny Parry (2010). I wondered if the village in which Pocock had conducted research in the 1950s might also fit the bill. Pocock died in 2007, and we had written the piece as tribute to his anthropology for the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. To restudy the village in which he had worked in Gujarat presented rather a different proposition to that suggested by Mayer. Pocock obviously could not help us himself; furthermore, he had left very few personal traces, having deliberately burned his fieldnotes notes on a bonfire in his garden when he retired from the University of Sussex. However, it was the case that Pocock worked in one of the most written about parts of India: Central Gujarat, home of the famous Patidar or Patel caste, who engaged strongly with Gandhi and the freedom movement. While in the field, Pocock had corresponded with the sociologist A.M. Shah (2012), who had retained some of the letters, and kindly made copies available to us. It was also the case that I knew Gujarat better than any other part of

India because of my own research in the region (Simpson 2011, 2013; Simpson and Kapadia 2010). I assumed, and certainly put forward the case strongly in the grant application, that the additional literature and my background knowledge would go some way to compensate for the lack of primary source material.

In 2010, I went to Sundarana to see for myself whether it would be a productive place to restudy. I had no idea what to expect of either the village or the marks left by Pocock. Part of me perhaps hoped there would be a statue of him in the village square or a library or dovecote put up in his name. There was nothing. During the brief day I spent there I met nobody who remembered him, nor anyone who thought academic research was worthwhile. But later I learned, and as a strict testament to the power of ethnographic fieldwork over less rigorous and less time-consuming methods, that memories of Pocock still inhabited the village. Pocock was, it turned out, well remembered.

From my own first fleeting visit, I left with the impression that the village was full of life, and run through with significant disparities of wealth and privilege. The quality of housing in the village varied considerably. All around verdant and fertile fields seemed to tell a story of prosperity. Nearby, were some of the wealthiest villages in India, from where migrants had settled overseas and now formed extensive transnational networks through which goods, politics and religion flowed in abundance. I also felt that rural Gujarat had been neglected somewhat in very recent times, with more books, and certainly more attention on the state's violent and casualised cities.

David F. Pocock (1928-2007) read English at Cambridge, where he was influenced by the literary criticism and social philosophy of F.R. Leavis. At Oxford, under the supervision of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, he wrote on the Nilotic tribes of Sudan. For his doctoral work, he focused on the 'Asians' (Gujaratis) in East Africa. The experience later took him as a post-doctoral researcher to Gujarat in search of more 'authentic' Indians. Between 1953 and 1956 he spent around eighteen months in the village of Sundarana (then part of Bombay State), also conducting complementary research in the

nearby villages of Dharmaj and Gorel. Pocock was appointed to a lectureship at Oxford in 1955. In 1966, Pocock moved to the University of Sussex, encouraged by F.G. Bailey (and the influence of Evans-Pritchard), where he remained until retirement. While at Sussex, Pocock published two monographs on his 1950s fieldwork in Sundarana, *Kanbi and Patidar* (1972) and *Mind, body and wealth* (1973). The first is a treatise on caste, kinship and marriage; the second is a masterful consideration of the changing nature of popular Hinduism in Sundarana.

Finding a third anthropologist to restudy, around whom a plausible individual and comparative case could be made, took slightly longer. In the end, Johnny Parry (who was one of my own doctoral supervisors) suggested I write F.G. Bailey, who he had last heard of at the University of California, San Diego. I did as Parry suggested and asked Bailey outright if and how he would support a restudy of Bisipara in Highland Orissa where he had conducted research throughout the 1950s. Clearly not perturbed by the cold calling, and to my delight, Bailey was instantly enthusiastic about the idea. He wrote back immediately offering:

... a cupboard full of handwritten surveys of fields, their yields, ownership, hours worked in them, hand-drawn maps, house censuses, various texts (all in Oriya, a few translated), a book of genealogies, household surveys, etc etc, all on crumbling bazaar-bought foolscap paper. Some photographs, 35mm negatives, last looked at when I gathered photos to put in *The witch hunt* [1994]... you can have complete access to everything ... (personal communication 3/5/2010).

Bailey also invited me to visit him in California, an invitation I took him up on a year later and again in the following year. He spoke openly for many hours, and often on camera, about his fieldwork and career in anthropology. His initial description of the material was understated. He gave us access to thousands of pages of field notes, surveys and work and farming diaries. Perhaps most interesting to read but hardest to use productively were his own notes of key learnings, suspicions, hunches and emerging lines of enquiry. In fact, together both he and Mayer gave us access to far

more material in fact than we could practically be expected to use thoughtfully within the timeframe of the project. The quantum of material, a career's worth of thought and writing, new fieldwork and the relation between two sets of data mediated by the complexities of village life turned each case study into a project much larger than a conventional piece of anthropological research.

Bailey was born in 1924, read classics at Oxford, and saw active service towards the end of the Second World War. Both experiences left marks. He joined the 'Manchester School' for his doctoral research with Max Gluckman and Elizabeth Colson. He started his teaching career at SOAS in 1956, where he taught alongside Adrian Mayer. He moved to the University of Sussex in 1964, where he founded the anthropology department and worked alongside David Pocock. In 1971, he shifted to the University of California San Diego, where he remained until retirement.

Bailey conducted his principal fieldwork in the villages of Bisipara (then population 700) and smaller 'Baderi' (properly Boida) in the highlands of Orissa between 1952 and 1955 and again in 1959. Although Bailey is well known for his anthropology of politics (1969), he wrote ethnographic monographs based on his village research during his time at SOAS (1957, 1960, 1963). These describe and analyse social change at the level of the village, caste and regional politics. He intended these to be heavyweight interventions (and they were) in the key debates of the day. In the 1990s, he revisited his own Bisipara research with three further retrospective books, written from a comfortable chair in California. These are sublime, dark and haunting accounts, intended to establish the philosophical and moral underpinnings of daily life in the village in the 1950s (Bailey describes them as 'memorials' to the time). The first (1994) examines the social mechanisms through which truth is determined and how explanations are given structure and meaning in Bisipara; the second (1996) asks why inter-caste violence never escalated beyond a certain point, i.e. in Bailey's language: why Bisipara's residents were not 'genocidal enthusiasts'; the third (1998) re-examines the modes and expressions of politics in Orissa in the 1950s.



With help from Patricia Jeffery, who became the Co-Investigator on the project, I wrote an application to the Economic and Social Research Council, the social science funding body the United Kingdom. The application was successful and we were then faced with the difficult task of recruiting three post-doctoral researchers. We were confounded by the number of young scholars with PhDs and relevant research experience who responded to our advertisement. I think we had unconsciously assumed that would work with South Asian scholars, for political and practical reasons. In the end, and due to forces beyond our control, we recruited two Italians and a German, two were women and one was a man. Each had been schooled in a different anthropological tradition and fieldwork techniques. Importantly, each came with experience of local languages and fieldwork in the relevant parts of India, and burgeoning enthusiasm for the project. In time, each of the post-doctoral researchers developed their own relationships with their predecessors, the research and the villagers. I have often been concerned that David Pocock might have been irritated by our interest in him and his work. He had been influenced by ideas of renunciation, and towards the end of his life he variously attempted to break and erase links with his past. Adrian Mayer and F.G. Bailey likewise formed their own opinions and relations with those charged with ‘restudying’ their materials. These, however, are not my stories to tell.

Once the project got underway, we convened regularly at SOAS, often with Adrian Mayer. We held a series of seminars and workshops on rural India and the methods best suited to restudying things. We held a memorable session at the Lisbon meeting of the European Conference of South Asian Studies in 2012, to which we were able to invite Jan Breman, Adrian Mayer and others to discuss the methodological pitfalls of studying rural change. We also presented our initial ideas at the Centre for Social Studies in Surat and at various venues in Delhi, Mumbai and Gujarat.

Over the following three years, the strengths and weaknesses of a comparative restudies project became increasingly pronounced. Our initial discussions had helped focus our attention, fieldwork helped to further refine the focus, and as we came to write up the project we encountered new kinds of issues. In what follows, I focus loosely on these



three stages: preparation, fieldwork and writing. I do not wish to give a descriptive account of each stage, but instead outline with a broad brush some of the major context-setting work we had to do and the problems and excitements involved in stepping where others have stepped before.

### **Comparing contributions**

One of the greatest challenges we faced was understanding not *what* but *how* and *why* the three anthropologists wrote what they did. On one level, we had to think about the discipline at the time and the influence of structural functionalism and other kinds of theoretical innovation on their work. As British anthropologists, they represented schools of thought associated with the University of Manchester, the London School of Economics, and the University of Oxford, respectively. Bailey was associated with the transactionalism and mode of analysis of Max Gluckman, which became known as the ‘Manchester School’. Adrian Mayer attended Malinowski’s much-talked-about seminar at the LSE. David Pocock was tutored by E.E. Evans Pritchard and had a close relationship with Louis Dumont. All three were influenced by theories of lineages and affinity which were fashionable at the time. Mayer and Bailey were fascinated by what would happen to villages in the new political set-up of Independent India; Pocock barely acknowledges a world outside the village. Consequentially, all three of them knew M.N. Srinivas and separately visited him in Baroda.

The end of Empire and war in Europe coincided with a new interest in India’s villages. Anxious post-war governments invested in research in former colonies; while in India, the village was at the centre of important differences of opinion between the great leaders of the day (Jodhka 2002). The village became the instrument of centralised planning through the America-influenced Community Development Programme (Dube 1958) and thus part of the Cold War struggle in India.

The period also marked the birth of a new discipline in India called ‘sociology’, in which many now well-known Indian, American and European scholars collaborated (see Jodhka 1998 for epistemology and consequences). Srinivas’s *India’s villages* (1955) collection was based on papers first published in this journal. The contributors, who included Bailey, attempted, in some ways, to counter the insipid uni-lineal model of ‘modernisation’ and ‘westernisation’, which remained strong in sociological and planning discourse at the time (and arguably surfaces from time to time in recent literature on urban India). The contributors to the Srinivas volume as well as to Marriott’s (1955) parallel venture, showed how villages were dynamic and complicated arenas, rather than stagnant oases of simplicity, and how village life was intimately linked to the drawing-rooms, think-tanks and commercial fashions of the city.

In addition to the intellectual influence of Srinivas, our original three had more in common. As I have described, they had over-lapping professional lives: Bailey and Mayer started their teaching careers at SOAS, Bailey and Pocock later taught together at Sussex; in pairs, they occasionally wrote for the same edited collections; the three were however most obviously linked by their involvement with the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. The journal was founded in 1957 by the French sociologist Louis Dumont and Pocock. Dumont probably remains the most influential European sociologist to have worked in India, and the journal remains a landmark in the field to this day.

Many of the articles in the first three issues of *Contributions* were written by Dumont or Pocock, and were (originally) unsigned, in token of what was to be a collaborative endeavour with a common theoretical position—apart, that is, from a strong critical statement against their manifesto for a ‘sociology of India’ from Bailey (1959), who regarded their ‘India is one’ slogan as a narrow form of ‘culturology’ and against the proper traditions of comparative sociology. From the mid-1960s, the journal most readily represents the new Indian sociology, which was defined by long-term ethnographic fieldwork and a focus on the structures and functions of social organisation. Mayer edited the journal for a period in the 1970s, and all three served on

the editorial board of the second series of the journal for various periods from 1967 onwards.

None of this is to say that the three were anything-like united in their intellectual approach because significant differences – both subtle and stark – lie across the range of their writing. Briefly, but with emphasis, these relate to the correct relation between holism and individualism, or structure and agency, arguments which have dominated and factionalised Indian sociology since its inception, and reflect a grander history of intellectual disagreement within the social sciences.

### **Studying villages over time**

Theoretical debate in anthropology has shown how long-term studies necessarily shift the emphasis of analysis from stasis to change, undermining the sureties of the ‘ethnographic present’ (Colson et al. 1976; Royce and Kemper 2002) and ‘being there’. Time changes things and not always in a logical or predictable fashion; things do not always have trajectories, in any straightforward sense (for a critique of the restudies method along these lines see Jeyaranjan 1996).

Anthropologists of India have traced shifts in rural life through their own long-term research engagements (Breman 2007; Epstein et al. 1998; Gough 1981, 1989; Kolenda 2003; Minturn 1993, to name a few). Economists have also conducted longitudinal research in village India (notably Lanjouw and Stern 1998). Many of the conclusions of these studies are corroborated by Patricia Jeffery’s (2016) own ongoing research in Bijnor in Uttar Pradesh.

Another approach to change over time in anthropology, ‘the restudy’, involves the reappraisal of someone else’s fieldsite, fieldwork and findings. Susan Wadley’s (1994, 2001) longitudinal research also in Uttar Pradesh is also of this type, and closest to what we initially had in mind, being based on the notes and writing of the missionaries Charlotte and William Wiser in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Wadley’s own research visits. Against the backdrop of the changing village,

Wadley provocatively outlines the emergence of a spirit of optimism, alongside the loss of power among the traditional elite, and growing disparities of wealth.

Restudies of the data of anthropologists by anthropologists have a curious and exciting history, often drawing critical attention to the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the methods of the discipline. Notably, of course, the method highlights the research ‘biases’ introduced by gender, age, competence and so forth. The bitter debate on gender, honesty and ethnographic authority provoked by Derek Freeman’s reappraisal of Margaret Mead’s claims (after Mead’s death) for the sexual lives of Polynesian youths suffice to make the point (see Levy 1984 and Marshall 1993 amongst others on this episode).

Mayer had already conducted a ‘restudy’ of his own in Malabar in the 1940s (1952). His text, complemented by fieldwork, is largely based on the written materials to which he had access in London for his diploma thesis. These included a study by Gilbert Slater conducted in 1916 called *Some South Indian villages* and P.J. Thomas and R.C. Ramakrishnan’s resurvey of the same villages, which was published in 1937. Mayer used these studies as the baseline for his own measurement of change. Slater included the analysis of twelve villages, concluding that various strands of economic, social and religious customs are interwoven in the web of Indian life, adding ‘low wages, low efficiency, and high abstinence are the ground plan of the pattern’. Two decades later, Thomas, who was a student of Slater, and then Professor of Economics at the University of Madras, saw little improvement in the agricultural situation, holdings had fragmented, improved cultivation methods were poorly implemented, casual labour and debt had increased, and water management remained ‘backward’. Against this backdrop, Thomas noted that transport was much improved and had broken the isolation between town and village, education had spread, exploitative money lending was giving way to ‘genuine investment’, government and medical infrastructures were much improved (Thomas and Ramakrishnan 1940; and Haswell 1967 for a neat summary).

The second survey returned to the findings of the first, with a lengthy section in the Thomas study showing how the data collected are to enable comparison, as far as possible, with the original survey. Mayer's own book also has at its core a humanistic concern with poverty, equality and justice. He saw the region to be changing fast. He explored the effects of law, universal suffrage (introduced as he was finishing the book in 1952) and the interplay between subsistence and cash crops on the local economy. Overall, he saw caste distinctions to be lessening, which he likened to a structure 'crumbling'. Caste was growing weaker in towns than in villages and amongst the young and the educated. Access and control over land in Malabar was also becoming less caste dependent, as other forms of prestige arose (1952: 25-51). Overall, rugged social stratification was changing into a smoother and level landscape, on which caste was being supplanted by wealth as the marker of importance (1952: 137).

The same materials have subsequently been utilised by various scholars associated with the Institute of Development Studies (Madras), who have resurveyed the 'Slater villages' (as they are now known), comparing the results with socio-economic data collected first in the early twentieth century with later surveys (Athreya 1984, 1985, for example). John Harriss has also used this data, and as well as that collected by S. Guhan and Joan Mencher in 1980s (1983), who looked at living conditions, technology, landownership and village power structures, to re-examine Iruvelpattu in Tamilnadu. Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj again describe the continuities and changes in the village. Significantly, reading across two of their published papers on different 'Slater villages' they point to both the continued importance of agriculture (2010) and the 'post agrarian' (2012) nature of the countryside. Here, the result is that agriculture remains vitally important to the poorer sections, but only a minority of households depend on agriculture.

The sheer duration of sustained interest in these villages (and there are others) provides a fascinating chronical of social and scholarly change. In important regards, our own studies, as I will discuss later, have arrived at similar conclusions. Two things, however, distinguish our study from these important

longitudinal investigations. The first is the *comparative* aspect (three states and three different original baseline studies); the second is the rather straightforward fact that two of the three original researchers are alive and enthusiastic. The project was, therefore, intended to be a novel experiment in practical comparative field methodology and inter-generational ethnography, which built on the insights of long-term field engagements of others and the accumulated results of repetitious visits to the same fields. We also conceived of this project as a contribution to a discipline, a means of consolidating past effort – where data of known provenance could be used to measure change.

Significantly, then, what distinguished this project from others is the fact that Bailey and Mayer were not only alive and well, but also volunteered their time and materials to actively participate in the project. It is one thing to restudy the work of somebody who is dead, and who cannot argue back, and whose feelings cannot be hurt; it is quite another to work alongside living anthropologists, whose reputation and opinions play quite directly into the research itself. Likewise, it is one thing to read someone's fieldnotes in an archive or library, but it is quite another to have the author of those fieldnotes explain and elaborate. I do not think it coincidental that some of the first publications to emerge from the research have been on Gujarat, where we have not had access to fieldnotes or the spoken word of David Pocock.

It was clear from the outset that we all had to be sensitive to one another's approaches to anthropology. Anthropologists are not generally trained to work in teams. Quite the opposite, they are usually taught solitary fieldwork techniques, in which field relationships are about generating research data, rather than professional cooperation. Therefore, working so intimately with one another proved something of an epistemological as well as interpersonal challenge.

We also had to be mindful of the fact that the views of the original anthropologists on both the project and the value and worth of anthropology more generally might be very different to the younger members of the team. Specifically, anthropology

is a much more self-aware discipline today than it was some six decades hence. Over the last few years, we have seen that not all members of the team share a unified vision of the aims and objectives, let alone methods, of anthropology as an academic practice. There were also questions of a more practical nature. How were we to treat confidential or controversial information contained in their field notes the field? How would we even know if the things anthropologists recorded as significant in the 1950s continued to form or influence part of village life today? How were we to treat the original material in relation to contemporary research practice which necessitates confidentiality and anonymity? What were we to do if there were Malinowski-diary moments? Malinowski (1967) had famously kept a diary separate to his field notes, in which he recorded his personal thoughts and desires. When published, posthumously, the material cast what some have seen as a sceptical shadow over his claims to a scientific method.

I discuss these issues in what follows.

### **Reflexivity and methodology**

As a team, we had six field-working anthropologists to compare, Bailey, Mayer, Pocock and the three post-doctoral researchers who conducted the 'restudy' work, Tina Otten, Tommaso Sbriccoli and Alice Tilche. These relations and the slippages between them were mediated by myself as Principal Investigator and Patricia Jeffery as the Co-Investigator, an anthropologist and anthropologist-cum-sociologist respectively; therefore, methodological and reflexive debate and awareness became central component of the initial months of the project. Rather than treating the original ethnographies as either beyond empirical scrutiny or as a subjective fiction, we worked to understand the processes that brought them into being. We attempted to identify the methodological techniques and theoretical devices of the original anthropologists and reflected similarly on the practices of the 'restudying' anthropologists in a more general sense. In fact, however, the activities and techniques of their fieldwork became much clearer once the team itself started work in the field.



From the 1980s, the critical work on the politics of representation and the role of subjectivity in anthropological research has grown apace. This literature has critically considered how age, gender, ethnicity and class influence the ways people interact with the anthropologist in the field and how ‘informants’ are willing to share their lives. The point to emerge from these important debates as we understood them within the project was that it was not going to be possible to conduct a ‘carbon copy’ of the original fieldwork; nor, we concluded, was solely aiming to do so the most interesting or intellectually productive objective. No one in the modern discipline of social/cultural anthropology/Indian sociology believes that the generation of anthropological data can be simply separated from the personal traits and relative competence or diligence of the anthropologist. This is not to say, however, that there is no point in trying to ask the same questions as the original anthropologists did. Such questions were obviously going to yield their own significant and comparable data, but they would also allow the researchers to begin to see the villages broadly as their predecessors might have done. We reasoned that we could then test their general propositions and hypotheses and re-assess the validity of the original claims in the light of the new data.

At another level, the introspective gaze on the epistemological practices of the discipline made us mindful of the frames and assumptions included in the presentation of the lives of others. We also discovered published criticisms and reviews of the work of Bailey, Mayer and Pocock, both specific and general, and of some of the limitations inherent to the kind of questions they asked. For example, their general focus on agnatic kin in villages only represents the social relations of the villagers in one particular way to the exclusion of others.

Also influential on our plans were debates on the cultural history of the prominent role of caste in anthropological writing on India and the disentanglement of this intellectual concern from empirical realities on the ground (see Fuller 1996; Inden 1990; Parry 2007). To put this simply, was their focus on caste a straightforward reflection of the significance of the institution to village life? Or, was it also part

of the intellectual fashions of the moment? Of course, it was probably both of these things, but it is far from easy to untangle such divergent rationale when looking back in time. Similarly, but in a different register, there is no mention of the Partition of India in any of the published work. Does this mean that Partition was not important in the villages of India at the time, less than five years after those tragic events? Or, does it mean that the anthropologists of the period focused on, and saw legitimacy and authenticity in, village matters? Big politics were perhaps better left to the political scientists.

Having said all of that, it is an error to regard reflexive practice in anthropology as the exclusive dominion of recent times. Bailey, Mayer and Pocock, for example, have each, to a lesser and greater extent, discussed their own epistemological practices. This rare openness to critical scrutiny (reflected most directly by Bailey's and Mayer's willingness to participate in this project) also makes their work particularly suitable for restudy. Bailey, for example, provides a candid account of the method and fallibility of his own land surveys (1957). He later took the uncommon step of writing three retrospective monographs (1994, 1996, 1998) to 'memorialize Bisipara and its people of forty years ago' which actively and consciously lend themselves to comparison and scrutiny against new ethnographic data. Mayer had similarly reflected on the role of memory in the creation of anthropological knowledge through his revisits to the field (1989) and social change (1996). Pocock wrote widely on teaching anthropology, developing 'personal anthropology', through which students could think about 'reality' in ethnographic writing: his favoured and most eloquent example (1994) was the deconstruction of the invisible frames of reference in his own early writing on Gujarat. Interestingly, he also set his students at the University of Sussex the task of dissecting the use of personal pronouns in F.G. Bailey's writing on politics in order to determine what the author himself might think about political practices.

More than once during this project, Mayer expressed his doubts about the wisdom of having embarked on such a course. He told me that it was such a long time ago, that he could no longer remember how he knew things about the village with so

much certainty. ‘What’ he said ‘if I just made it all up?’ Bailey too, after his initial and unbridled enthusiasm for the project, began to have some doubts. ‘What are you going to do’ he asked ‘if you discover I am a charlatan?’

I have often wondered why anyone should have been surprised by Malinowski’s diary. It shows him to be a distinctly human kind of human being, and anyone who thought of him as otherwise can only have themselves to blame. I think however the sense of doubt both Bailey and Mayer expressed in their own lives and works can be taken as a lead into a more profound point about truth, method and time. They were both copious note takers and enthusiastic fieldworkers and the idea that they made anything up simply does not accord with the demonstrable relationship between the initial tentative field notes, the more refined condensations of these in reports and summaries, and the books they finally wrote.

However, over the course project it became quite clear to me that what they thought they remembered most about their fieldwork was actually not the act of fieldwork, but what they had chosen, wilfully or not, to write about it. Even then, what they remembered most vividly were the arguments they put forth in the most condensed form in their published work.

I found this to be one of the most interesting if casual realisations of the methodological backstory to the whole project. That by writing, first field notes and later books and papers, you are giving personal memory an architecture. You are dividing the world in particular ways, and, in time, those ways become confused with memories and they become memory itself. This was particularly true for Bailey, who for various reasons, some desperately unfortunate, had not returned to his field site since the 1950s. This was less so for Mayer because he had returned to the village on a number of occasions, at least once a decade, and most recently as part of this project. It was almost as if the sense they had made from the field became the reality of the village in their descriptions. Of course, the village had influenced the sense they had made from it, but the partial renderings

and occasional and sporadic snapshots of village life they both relied upon, could not easily be presupposed to represent all of a greater reality.

### **India in the 1950s**

In addition to the theory and personal and academic politics we also had to think about and research the intellectual and moral atmosphere in India at the time. Although everybody on the team had in different ways studied post-colonial transformation and history, this required further thought. The following is a summary of what we saw as the main contours.

The three original anthropologists worked in India at an extraordinary time. Universal suffrage had been introduced in and around 1950 and suddenly placed agriculture and rural life at the heart of metropolitan and party political projects. The countryside had been both neglected and exploited by the colonial government. It is a remarkable and telling historical fact that India remained dependent on food imports in the years shortly after Independence, so thoroughly done over had the country been by colonial administration, which added to the urgency of rethinking rural questions. In the years that were to follow, the countryside became the focus of a whole series of agricultural and developmental initiatives. It is also the case that the Indian village became a key site in the ensuing Cold War, as the rival political ideologies from the United States and the former Soviet Union battled to find footing and influence in the country.

As F.G. Bailey once told me, ‘the 1950s now seems like a different world’. After a deliberate pause, he added the word ‘almost’. It is true that the children of newly-independent rural India were born into a world where there was no refrigeration or reliable means to communicate over distance. The possibilities offered by rural internet were literally unthinkable; there was no electricity for most.

Looking back, it is tempting to see the lack of recent technologies as characterising life in the past. In the 1950s, telegraph wires crossed the country,

railways moved people around, and imported cloth and piece goods were available in provincial bazaars. The government produced radio programmes and leaflets for the rural population. Mobile cinemas toured the country showing popular films as well as agricultural propaganda. Local rulers, and two of our three original anthropologists, brought cars into the villages, along with other gadgets of 1950s-modernity such as typewriters and wireless sets.

The availability of technology has shifted by degree and intensity, rather than absolutely; however, when placed alongside other changes the overall consequences have been profound. On average, those born in a village in the 1950s could expect to live for forty years, today the national average life expectancy is three decades more. Infant mortality rates have dropped. In the two of the three villages we studied, the population has grown between three and four times since the 1950s; in Bisipada the population has not expanded much, in part, but not entirely, due to boundary changes and land reforms in the region.

In the 1950s, there were very few literate people in these villages. Those who could read and write, and who had time on their hands, tended to become the research assistants of anthropologists. They were few in number. Pocock worked informally with two assistants, one who, unlike the anthropologist, is alive today and has vivid memories of those times. Bailey employed a number of villagers, including two research assistants. They conducted a great deal of the survey and diary-keeping work on his behalf. They also served as key informants, documenting myths, histories and accounts of events in the village. Today, the government-reported literacy rates for the three states is around seven out of ten people.

Then, metalled roads, combustion engines and plastics were rare. The journey from Jamgod to Dewas took three hours by bullock cart, today it takes 15 minutes on a motorbike. India had yet to go to war with Pakistan, and the formation of dangerous 'others' was yet to take deep root in the national imagination. The Babri Masjid stood tall in Ayodhya. The IR8 rice seed of the so-called Green

Revolution was over a decade away. Constitutional policies of affirmative action to better the lot of the downtrodden and untouchable were just beginning to have effects. Democracy, local governance and public works were beginning to arrive in villages for the first time. For all three of the anthropologists whose work we reconsidered, the village was on the cusp of momentous change. There was little nostalgia in this conclusion, because they also demonstrated how villages had changed in the past.

Since then, a series of events, some big, others small have had an impact on rural India. Nehru's socialism, influenced by post-colonial and cold-war politics, has given way to the forces of (neo)-liberalisation and globalisation. Various waves of development policy have been unevenly implemented across the country, along with political devolution (notably Panchayati Raj, the passing of some responsibility for economic development, social justice and taxation to the village level) and the affirmative action of caste-specific and gendered 'reservations' have altered patterns of influence within villages. Land-reforms and new technologies have transformed agriculture, whilst public health programmes enhanced children's chances of survival. Other technologies compressed time and space, both allowing and necessitating new forms of migration and employment. Overseas, some migrants from India, nostalgic for the old ways, have invested in the 'upliftment' of their ancestral lands. This is particularly true in Gujarat, where airborne transnationalism has become a way of life.

Although Mayer and Bailey are still alive, the 1950s really was as if another world, a long lifetime away, almost.

### **Broad contours of change**

Dipankar Gupta (2010) has put forth the provocative and broad thesis that the Indian village is a redundant economic unit. In his view, the agrarian economy has withered in the face of rising rates of rural-urban migration: the village has become a vicinity. Gupta might perhaps be overstating the case, but his argument draws dramatic attention to how rural India has changed since the 1950s.

The villages in our project display the signs, institutions and buildings of post-colonial development and political policies, the consequences of economic and land reform, and the burdens of an expanding population. As is well-known, land has fragmented, contributing to the impossibility of making a sustainable living from agriculture.

These are also sites in which novel and significant sociological processes are being played out today. In each location, there has been a growth and consolidation of grassroots Hindu nationalist politics. In Odisha, land rights and tribal identities have become burning issues, as people have been brought into conflict with transnational corporations and rapacious extractive industries. Rapid industrialisation in Madhya Pradesh has brought villagers into wage relations with India's industrial houses and the boom town of Dewas. In Jamgod, a once-lowly Muslim community has grown, and grown wealthy, and now dominates many facets of village life. In Gujarat, the village has become part of the transnational networks and nostalgic and nationalist politics of Patidar migrants in East Africa and UK, and the Muslims were banished in 2002 and their mosque vandalised.

Life in these villages is clearly subject to different kinds of broad influence and pressure from when they were studied in the 1950s. Political parties, unions and nationalist and civil movements play significant roles. The three case studies also very clearly remind us of the impossibility and dangers of generalising about the rural world, as if it were a homogenous and identifiable set of conditions or qualities. Thinking across the case studies has allowed us to clearly see the value of disaggregating the idea of 'the countryside' and likewise a 'rural sociology'.

## **Conclusion**

Anthropological writing about the Indian village of the 1950s did much to move theories of social change away from mechanistic, teleological and evolutionary development schemes, towards an emphasis on human agency, an acceptance of the contingency of events, and the study of multiple and relative modernities. At



the time, anthropologists took the Indian village as a self-contained fieldsite (although not often as a self-evident unit of analysis) and attempted to measure and understand aspects of life there, often conducting thorough and extensive surveys of households and land-holding. The records they produced in their ethnographic writing now form an intimate kind of historic source material; a status which, although valuable and novel, must be accompanied by qualification and methodological reflection.

In the 1950s, anthropologists clearly saw that farming could no longer form the backbone of the village economy. According to them, there would be an increase in other forms of employment, and a corresponding shift in traditional patterns of hierarchy and inequality. The influence of land, at least on the scale of the village, was inevitably to lose ground to commercial acumen and cash wealth. They also saw that the enlarging state and the influence of legislation on village ways would change the horizons and traditional patterns of hierarchy, which so-characterised life in rural India. Affirmative action policies and land reforms in particular were unsurprisingly anticipated as having dramatic consequences of village life.

Anthropologists at the time could see that rural India was in the midst of radical change. Specifically, Mayer saw that increasing pressures on land in the village of Jamgod would lead to fundamental shifts in the agrarian economy and augment dependency on nearby towns for livelihoods. Pocock predicted that the hierarchy of caste in Central Gujarat would wane, as the principles of purity and pollution ordering inter-caste relationships crumbled, along with the traditional relationships of the agrarian way of life and the increasing popularity of congregational Hinduism. In Bisipada, Bailey foresaw that alternative occupations would emerge as large families resulted in the fragmentation of landholdings. Traders would rise in wealth and power over the old landowners.

These themes also echo through the consecutive studies of the 'Slater Villages', and are anticipated in Mayer's contribution to that sub-genre. I find it noteworthy that the

predictions made in the 1950s have remained the key and sometimes repetitive findings of the subsequent six decades of rural studies, in India but also elsewhere. In sum, the countryside has been hollowed out, farming has ceased to provide an income for most, and dirty finger nails have gone out of fashion; livelihoods have diversified; migration and other forms of petro-mobility have increased.

There appears to have been something in the air. The Anthropological Survey of India also started an industrial scale ‘restudies’ project at about the same time. This effort included the villages in which both Bailey and Mayer worked. Thus it was that during our research, we met teams of anthropologists from the Survey in both Jamgod and Bisipada. They were working within an inter-disciplinary framework but were asking many of the same questions as us. They too were drawn to the villages on the basis of previous anthropological investigation. Their findings are not yet available.

To me, what appears like coincidence is more than that and suggests a new role and place for old ethnography within new research. Anthropology has become a measure of things, and can sensibly and productively be used as a historical resource. Like all archives, the material must be used with caution and an understanding of its strengths, weaknesses and original purposes; however, we have found that anthropology contains much certainty, if not to say ‘reality’, in any simple sense. The main problem with the archive is knowing what is certain and central, rather than serendipitous or peripheral or a limited product of that particular intellectual and political moment.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on why at least two separate governments should simultaneously decide that restudying anthropological work from the 1950s should be a worthwhile and fundable exercise. The 1950s is almost a lifetime ago, almost. The number of people who were alive during the great transition from colonial to post-colonial world is dwindling. First-hand access to those who lived through this momentous upheaval is disappearing. Perhaps, also, there is nostalgia for a time when the world was optimistic and enthusiastic about

the future. It is also the case that rural India, as other parts rural world, is on the cusp of new and intense forms of social change. Looking backwards to the past, identifying trends and trajectories may also help us understand possible futures for the rural world.

In the end, we decided that it was better not to frame the projects only as ‘restudies’. For one, we had little primary data for the intervening decades, more in the case of Jamgod – but very little for the other two sites. We have found the idea of ‘doing the same fieldwork twice’ to be more productive as an idea. The new researchers could not step in the footprints of a previous generation because the winds of change had blown many of those away. The villages had clearly changed too, and so therefore must the nature of our research questions. Juxtaposing the ethnography from the 1950s with that of today is not a subtle or respectful approach to the key transformations of the important post-colonial decades; neither does it allow us to say much about actual trajectories of change and continuity. However, the results are striking.

The trends identified in the 1950s as influencing the future direction of village life continue to define in a broad sense what village life is about and what it means to be a villager. With brevity, and glossing complexity and variation across the sites, the juxtaposition reveals in clear form that the role of agriculture and the material and symbolic capital of small-scale land-holding has declined. Farming is now peripheral to many routines, rituals and prosaic concerns in these villages, most so in Gujarat and least so in Odisha. Livelihoods and agricultural production continue to diversify, and to a great extent farming has simply gone out of fashion. Caste hegemony remains, modified of course by various legislative measures, but other forms of ethnic and religious politics tend to dominate daily life. Religion in particular plays an important role in identity politics and has produced vertical schisms within rural communities. Significantly, this trend appears to have been entirely absent from the ethnography of the 1950s (not perhaps in Punjab or Bengal).

If we are to trust the ethnography, then other features of village life absent from the 1950s include: mass unemployment, ‘over’ education, and endemic cultures of ‘waiting’, suggesting that the culture, aspirations and frames of reference for villagers have changed quite fundamentally. Land fragmentation has combined with speculative land and construction markets to create new conflicts between agriculture and non-agricultural ways of rural life. Private monopolists or ‘mafias’ dominate many of the local supply chains, which we might imagine to have been property of the state in some of the intervening decades. Transnational capital has become increasingly sophisticated at extracting revenue from village markets. Service professions, a middle class and strangers have properly entered rural life. Fundamentally, a mobility paradigm organises daily and longer term life-cycle expectations for many, including commuting and regional and international migration.

We also found that the village, however hollowed out in economic or residential terms, is regularly evoked as a unit of political mobilization. Perhaps, however, this is primarily a product of the structures of democracy, rather than a primordial or meaningful expression of collective identity. Local government policy often seems out of step with the order of things. National government policy for rural areas seems increasingly to reflect private and corporate realities rather than defining them. Finally, in some key respects, the conceptual distinction between villages and cities appears to be fading, but agriculture has not gone away. Vocabularies of social science and public policy require reworking beyond labels such as ‘post-agrarian’ or ‘rurban’. Such terms flatten the dense contours of the new landscape in which paddy grows amid the concrete and steel of novel industriousness.

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This is the accepted version of an article published in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Please refer to the published version when citing, available at: <http://www.epw.in/journal/2016/26-27/review-rural-affairs/village-restudies.html>

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