
UNIT 4 VILLAGE INDIA*

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you would be able to:

- discuss the nature of villages in Indian society;
- describe village as a social unit as well as the caste system and traditions that exist in village society;
- explain the village economy both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial India; and
- examine village as a political unit in relation to the state and its transition from pre-colonial to post-colonial period and also the present Panchayati Raj system.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In our previous block we have examined Indian society as civilization, as a colony and as a nation-state. The previous block attempted to look at India in a broad sense by examining the nature of the society not only in terms of its essential elements and its civilizational heritage but also in terms of the various changes that came about due to colonialism and the influence of modern institutions and values.

In this unit, we are going to look at the village societies and culture as they exist in India. India still lives in villages as more than sixty percent of the population even today reside in rural areas and depend on agriculture and related professions. We are going to examine village as a social, economic and political unit, along with the caste system, the interactions between Little and Great Traditions, and Panchayati Raj system. The colonial period witnessed and brought large scale

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changes in political, economic and social spheres which had an effect on rural life as well.

Even though growth of urbanism and rise of cities attracted rural population to shift to cities, village as an entity continues to be important in the social, cultural, political and economic landscape of India. The centrality of village in Indian society can be gauged from the number of village studies in the 1950s and 60s. These studies give us some insights on village as social unit.

4.2 INDIAN VILLAGE: MYTH AND REALITY

With regard to Indian village we have a lot of myths, let us look at those beliefs and their realities in detail.

India's village can be traced far back in history which creates a sense of timelessness and continuity. The *Arthashastra* (400 BCE-200AD) provides us with a classification of the king's duties related to the administrative affairs of the village. In the medieval times Al Biruni's *Kitab al Hind* (early eleventh century) gives us an account of the caste occupation based organisation in the village.

British colonial administrative view of India was based on the category of 'village'. The perspective developed and forwarded was that India was primarily composed of villages which were self-sufficient and independent. The writings of James Mill and Charles Metcalfe and their notion of the Indian village community influenced the later scholars of Indian village. Metcalfe in 1810 had said that, 'the Indian village communities were little republics, having nearly everything they wanted within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seemed to last where nothing else lasted. Dynasty after dynasty tumbled down; revolution succeeded revolution but the village community remained the same'(quoted in Cohn, 1987:213). This was similar to Thomas Munro's 'mini republics' description for the Indian villages. Although Metcalfe's assessment of the Indian village was not shared by all colonial administrators, it nonetheless became the most accepted and dominant representation of India. In the colonial discourse, the Indian village was described as a self-sufficient community which had everything within its periphery. Caste system through its division of labour provided this view a practical functionality which meant communal ownership of land was marked by a functional integration of various occupational groups in the village. The famous attributes of Indian civilization of timeless continuity, simplicity and social harmony were attributed to the village. 'Each village was an inner world, a traditional community, self-sufficient in its economy, patriarchal in its governance, surrounded by an outer one of other hostile villages and despotic governments.' (Inden, 1990:133).

B. H. Baden-Powells' three volumes of *The Land System of British India* (1892) were not just a compilation of data but had a series of arguments about the nature of Indian village and its resources in relation to the state and its demand over these resources. Despite several research studies by Henry Maine and Baden-Powell on Indian villages that discussed village level conflict and regional variations of villages in terms of both structure and culture, the categorical and conceptual thinking about villages remained fixed on harmony and wholeness. This directed attention away from internal politics and conflicts at village level.

Also aspects of inequality, patterns of wealth distribution and divisiveness remained unattended. In the later decades of the nineteenth century we also find several emerging problems of famine, riots, land alienation and violence in the rural economy which deeply troubled the colonial masters, shaking their somewhat simplistic understanding of village India.

In many ways, even for the Indian nationalists, the idea of village as a representative of authentic native life was derived from the same kind of imagination. Though Gandhiji was careful enough not to glorify the decaying village of British India, he nevertheless celebrated the 'assumed' simplicity and authenticity of village life, as being representative of Indian-ness, an image largely derived from colonial representations of the Indian village. For Gandhi, India's soul lived in her villages. He imagined that every village would be a republic or panchayat, self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs (*Gram Swaraj*). He however also admitted it as being a dream, hence not practical in reality. For B. R. Ambedkar, village was 'a cesspool of factionalism and den of inequity' due to the practices of caste system.

Box 1: Views of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru on Indian villages

Mahatma Gandhi in his letter to Shri Jawaharlal Nehru on October 5, 1945 originally written in Hindi expressed his views on village, in general and specially in India. He wrote "..... I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live in peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth. I hold that without truth and nonviolence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realise truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of village life....."

Jawaharlal Nehru, in his reply to Babu's letter, wrote amongst other things, that, "The whole question is how to achieve this society and what its content should be. I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent".

(*The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol. IV. Selected Letters General Editor Shriman Narian. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. pp. 98-101).

In the early 1950s, many social scientists, many of whom were trained in the western universities or from the West, initiated field studies. The Economic Weekly (which later became Economic and Political Weekly) in the period between October 1951 and May 1954 published a series of short essays on individual villages, being studied by different anthropologists. These essays were later put together by M.N. Srinivas in the form of a book with the title *India's Villages* in 1955. The year 1955 saw some very serious studies on Indian Villages: McKim Marriot's book *Village India* appeared in the same year. The first volume of *Rural Profiles* by D.N. Majumdar also appeared in 1955. Full length study of a village near Hyderabad, *Indian Village* by S.C. Dube was also published in the same year.

Village Studies in India were contested by anthropological studies. Beteille, for example, argued ‘at least as far back in time as living memory went, there was no reason to believe that the village (he studied) was fully self-sufficient in the economic sphere (Beteille, 1996:136-7). Similarly Srinivas too contested the colonial notion of the Indian village being a completely self-sufficient republic. The village, he argued, ‘was always a part of a wider entity. (Srinivas, 1960:10).

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Mention two British and two Indian scholars and the main themes of their work on Indian Villages.

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In the next section we will be looking at Indian village as a social, economic and political unit in detail and also would be discussing how ‘independent’ Indian villages existed and how outside network of relations had an effect on rural life.

4.3 VILLAGE AS A SOCIAL UNIT

Village social life is organised around caste, kinship, economy, politics and religion. People’s social lives are mostly confined to their villages, their livelihoods and lives revolve around the rural environment and resources. The village is thus a point of prestige and personal identity. Along with caste, class or locality, village provides an important source of identity to its residents. At the same time the village is not an isolated unit, fairs, festivals and other celebrations required village to connect ritually with the wider world. In case of North Indian villages, the practice of village exogamy links the village in kinship and affinal relationships to other villages. According to Srinivas, an insult to one’s village had to be avenged like an insult to oneself, one’s wife, or one’s family (Srinivas, 1976:270).

Village studies from M.N. Srinivas’s study of the Coorgs (1952) to A.M. Shah and I.P. Desai (1988)’s works discuss how the solidarity marks inter-caste and intra-caste relations, to maintain stability within the village. Similarly, Dube argued that though Indian villages varied greatly in their internal structure and organisation, in their ethos and world-view, and in their life-ways and thought-ways; village communities all over the Indian sub-continent had a number of common features. The village settlement, as a unit of social organisation, represented a kind of solidarity which was different from that of the kin, the caste, and the class. Each village was a distinct entity, had some individual mores and usages, and possessed a corporate unity. Different castes and communities inhabiting the village were integrated in its economic, social, and ritual pattern by ties of mutual and reciprocal obligations sanctioned and sustained by generally accepted conventions. Notwithstanding the existence of groups and factions inside

the settlement, people of the village could, and did, face the outside world as an organised, compact whole (Dube,1960:202).

Activity 1

How is India's village represented in popular films? Was it seen as divided or depicted as having a collective unity? Share your thoughts with your fellow learners at the study centre.

Srinivas (1955), Dube (1955) and earlier Wisner (1936) emphasised on the unity of the village. Some of the anthropologists explicitly contested the unity thesis while others qualified their arguments by recognising the conflicts within the village and the ties that villagers had with the outside world. For instance, Beteille had argued that his study of village 'Sripuram as a whole constituted a unit in a physical sense and, to a much lesser extent, in the social sense' (Beteille, 1996:39).

Among those who nearly rejected the idea of the communitarian unity were Lewis (1958) and Bailey (1960). F.G. Bailey, for example provided a radical critique of the 'unity-reciprocity' thesis and offered an alternative perspective. Stressing on the coercive aspects of caste relations, Bailey (1960) says that the degree of interdependency and harmony between castes in the caste system is highly exaggerated. Since interdependency means reciprocity and consequently some degree of equality, that is not the case when we analyse caste system and relationship between castes. He says that the "the system works the way it does because the coercive sanctions are all in the hands of a dominant caste. There is a tie of reciprocity, but it is not a sanction of which the dependent castes can make easy use" (Bailey, 1960:258).

4.3.1 Caste System and Kinship Networks

The world of caste society is based on hierarchy. People were divided into higher or lower groups based on birth, their food, their dresses, ornaments, customs and manners were all ranked in an order of hierarchy. The first three *Varna*, namely, Brahmins (the priests or men of learning), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) and *Vaishyas* (traders) were regarded as *dvijas* or the twice born. The fourth category was that of Shudras, composed of numerous occupational castes that were regarded as relatively 'clean' and were not classed as "untouchables". In the fifth major category were placed all the "untouchable" castes. Within each category there were several sub-groups (*jatis* or sub-castes), which could be arranged in a hierarchical order within them. The empirical studies pointed out that 'in fact only the two opposite ends of the hierarchy were relatively fixed; in between, and especially in the middle region, there was considerable room for debate regarding mutual position' (Srinivas, 1994:5). Mutual rank was uncertain and this stemmed from the fact that mobility was possible in caste' (Srinivas, 1976:175).

Attempts to claim a higher ritual status through, what Srinivas called sanskritisation, was not a simple process, and could not be achieved only through rituals and life-style imitation. The group had to also negotiate it at the local power structure. Similarly, stressing secular factors, 'There was a certain amount of overlap between the twin hierarchies of caste and land. The richer landowners generally came from such high castes as Brahmins, and Lingayats while the

Harijans contributed a substantial number of landless labourers. In contrast to the wealthier household, the poor one was almost invisible (Srinivas, 1976:169).

4.3.2 Little Traditions and Great Traditions

Any study of the religion of Indian village show double processes working simultaneously between the religious beliefs and practices of the village and the wider Indian civilization. McKim Marriott, takes the concepts of ‘great tradition’ and ‘little tradition’ from Robert Redfield (1955) and has given the terms universalisation (elements of village culture being incorporated into a wider regional or even larger society) and parochialization (cultural elements of a pan-Indian nature filtering down to the village level through various modes of communication such as story-telling and folk drama) respectively to refer to the two aspects of this double process of interaction between the little and great traditions.

M.N. Srinivas’ (1950) concept of Sanskritisation also shows the interaction between religion at the local level and all India Hinduism which is *varna* based. Orthodox sanskritic elements travel from the higher castes to the lower castes. Modern western technology — railways, printing press, radio, films and now, television have also helped in the spread of Sanskritisation.

Sanskritisation is also about ‘universalization’ or identification with the larger religion, the identification of a local God or Goddess with some deity of the Hindu pantheon. Thus among the Coorgs, Ketrappa is identified with the Vedic deity Kshetrapala while the local cobra deity is identified with Subramanya or Skanda, the warrior son of Shiva. This helped the Coorg religious community to become incorporated in the wider Hindu religious community. Apart from festivals and deities, another important aspect of the religion of the village community is pilgrimage. Pilgrimage centres have attracted people from distant places in India. In traditional India, temple towns and sacred cities like Gaya, Mathura, Ajmer, Varanasi, Puri, Tirupathi and Amritsar attracted pilgrims even though roads were very poor and unsafe. Thus we see a continuous interaction between the little and great tradition in the religion of the village.

Caste endogamy (marriage within caste) and village exogamy (marriage outside village) were widely practiced. Relations outside the village meant travel to those areas where kins/ relatives lived at the time of festival or special occasions.

Social networks of the village through caste, kinship, marriage meant social relations with the outside world and thus, villages were not isolated units socially.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Explain the processes of universalization and parochialization.

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ii) What do you understand by the term village exogamy?

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4.4 VILLAGE AS AN ECONOMIC UNIT

Indian village as an economic self-sufficient unit was a long held myth. Even for Marx, Indian village represented a different kind of economic system — the Asiatic mode of production — which combined agriculture with production. The distinctiveness of the system, he believed also contributed to the unchanging and stifling character of society. For him, colonialism leading to class based stratification would bring positive changes for Indian society.

The impression that the village in pre-British India was economically self-sufficient was created by the existence of the *jajmani* system (relationship of reciprocity of economic exchange between landlords and peasants over generations), where payment was in kind/ grains (absence of monetisation), and the poor communications which limited the flow of goods.

It was William and Charlotte Wiser (1936/1969) who had conceptualised the social relationships among caste groups in the Indian village in the framework of ‘reciprocity’ in their study of Western UP village of Karimpur in the 1930s, regarded as one of the earliest work on the ethnographic study of village life in rural India, and of the *jajmani* system,.

Kathleen Gough’s study of Kumbapettai (1989) village in Tanjore, Andre Beteille’s study of Tamil village of Sripuram (1965), demonstrate how the structures of traditional caste hierarchy were getting replaced by class based categories of stratification. Gough (1989), over a period of three decades, studied caste and class relations and found that the castes of Brahmins, Non- Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas were also owners, tenants and laborers. The new classes of petty bourgeoisie, independent entrepreneur and semi proletariat came up, with the commercialisation of agriculture, achievement and skill criteria came up instead of the ascription based categories.

4.4.1 Economic Relationship between Village and the Outside World

Village markets that are to be distinguished from capitalist markets not only serve an economic purpose but also political, recreational and social purposes. The weekly markets or *Haats* that exist all over rural India from ancient times form major links with neighbouring villages and towns. They are important nodes for drawing in goods not available locally including, silver and gold which were essential for weddings in rural India. The annual camel fair in Pushkar, is an example of a rural market that has existed from times immemorial. The institution of weekly markets are cultural institutions with significance beyond mere

economic exchange and still prevail even though considerable improvements in transport and communication have made towns with regular markets accessible to villagers.



(A cattle fair in a village which attracts many buyers and sellers who come from afar (photo credit: Kiranmayi Bhsuhi)

The institution of caste based specialisation means that only some people can do certain tasks, like only those of potter caste can make pots, those of blacksmith caste can make iron implements and so on. All the artisan and servicing castes did not live within a single village, especially in the case of the smaller settlements. Certain castes provide services to a number of villages and were shared amongst the villages like, barbers, priests, doctors, etc. Again the urban sector depends on the rural hinterlands for its basic needs of food grain, raw materials for processed food, and handicrafts.

The village market became linked to the formal market networks when the capitalist system penetrated the rural areas. The availability of new economic opportunities differed in different villages especially with processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, which made the village a part of the wider economic system.

Following are some examples from the relevant case studies:

- i) S.C. Dube's *Indian Village* (1955) was the first full length study of a village, Shamirpet. It devoted one full chapter to the nature of changes coming in rural life which include increasing economic ties with the city of Hyderabad, even for social groups like the washerman.
- ii) McKim Marriot in the study of Kishan Garhi in Aligarh district of Uttar Pradesh (1955) gives an elaborate description of interaction between the people of different villages. He talks about how castes of Brahman priests, barbers, potters, carpenters, washermen and sweepers who live in Kishan Garhi go out to serve hereditary patrons (*Jajmans*) in some fifteen other villages and derive about one half of their income from these outside patrons.

Traders, wage workers living in Kishan Garhi regularly traveled many miles of the country side to other areas.

- iii) M.N. Srinivas in his study of village Rampura in Karnataka (1955) observes how World War-II brought increased cash for the dominant landowning Okkaliga caste with wartime rationing and shortages, which encouraged black marketeering. The profits of the wartime were used in different ways, as village was electrified, two rice mills were set up, bus lines were also started which made contact with Mysore City much easier.
- iv) Kathleen Gough's study of Kumbapettai village (1955), situated in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, describes how dominant Brahmin groups migrated to towns for education and employment and the immigration in Kumbapettai of lower castes from the neighbouring and less fertile areas was responsible for Kumbapettai coming in contact with the wider economic system.
- v) M.S.A. Rao in his study of Yadavpur (1974), a village situated on the fringe of Delhi, observed that growth of the city of Delhi created diverse opportunities of urban employment in sectors like gardening, dairy and poultry farming, trading, transport, etc.

Finally, we can conclude that the Indian villages were not economically self-sufficient even in the British times. Processes of industrialisation and urbanisation which began with the British colonial rule and gained further impetus after independence have made the village a part of the wider economic network. Rural economy has been even more affected with the planned development and welfare programs being introduced by the government.

In India, no two villages are same, even though they may share some similarities on various socio-economic scales. Welfare and development programs aimed at co-operative banking, commercial farming, Green Revolution techniques of farming, democratic processes, growth of Self-Help Groups for women, and various other progressive development programs by government have been attempted as village became the template for nation building exercise in post-independence India.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Briefly mention two studies by Indian scholars explaining economic ties of villages with the outside world.

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4.5 VILLAGE AS A POLITICAL UNIT

Many ethnographic studies, based on fieldwork, have explained that the Indian village have always been a part of the wider society and civilisation and not self-sufficient units.

British administrators in the early nineteenth century described Indian villages as 'little republics' with their simple form of self-government and almost no interference from the higher political authority. The state only demanded young men to serve in the wars and also claimed a share in the produce of the land as revenue for the state. This description of Indian villages was over-simplified and stated that the villages functioned unconcerned about who occupied the throne in the kingdoms of which they were a part territorially. The assumption that in pre-British India the village was autonomous politically (i.e. roughly the period just before the consolidation of British rule in India) except for paying tax to the local chief or the king and providing young men for wars is incorrect. The relationship between the king and his subjects was a complex one. There were several duties performed by the king towards his subjects. Roads, tanks and canals for irrigation were built along with temples. He also granted gifts of land to learned and pious Brahmins. The king was the head of all caste groups and panchayats. Any disputes regarding mutual caste rank and other inter-caste conflicts were ultimately settled by him. This task was not confined to just the Hindu rulers but even the Mughal kings and feudal lords settled questions affecting a caste.

In pre-British India, the villages enjoyed an active relationship with the State (mostly the Princely States or the Native States). The common people were concerned about who occupied the throne as they preferred a king who would protect them from raiding troops and thugs. If the chief or king belonged to a dominant local caste, his fellow caste members would help him in a crisis. It was not an unequal relationship with the kings as villagers could rebel and support a rival to the throne. The villagers could also migrate collectively in response to oppressive rule. If such mass-migration took place, the ruler lost out on revenue as land was available for settlement while labour was scarce. At the same time villages enjoyed a significant amount of independence as well as discreetness from the higher levels of the political system due to the absence of roads and poor communication. In day-to-day matters, the kings let the villagers govern themselves. The dominant caste formed the village panchayat to exercise authority in local matters, settled inter-caste disputes and maintained law and order in the village.

The relationship between the village and the ruler changed with the British colonial rule. British established an effective administration as development of communications followed the political occupation. Power of the village panchayat was greatly reduced by the system of modern law courts as major disputes and criminal offences were now settled there. Other government employees like the police, revenue officials, etc. came to the village.

4.5.1 Panchayati Raj System

The introduction of parliamentary democracy and adult franchise has made the village even more fully integrated with the wider political system in the post-

Independent era. In the present system, villagers elect members of local bodies like the Gram Panchayat and also elect members of the state legislature and Parliament. During election campaigns, regional and national political parties become active in the village and mobilise support for their parties. As we have discussed previously, government policies and programs like the Community Development Schemes affect the village.

The study of Rajasthan village, Devisar (1975) by Anand Chakravarti analysed concepts of power and authority and studied how land reforms and Panchayati Raj based political processes influenced and brought changes in social and political relations in the village.

The 73rd amendment of 1992 introduced SC/ ST reservation as well as 1/3rd reservation in seats for women in the Panchayats and made elections compulsory after every five years apart from other provisions, as road towards self-governance. Various schemes could be monitored through the Gram Panchayat bodies.

Although the village is a political unit with an elected panchayat to run the day-to-day administration, it is part of the district or zilla, which is part of the state. The state is part of the Indian Union. There is interaction between these different levels of the political system.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Describe briefly relationship of Indian Village with the State in pre-British India.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed that although the village has a definable structure and is a clear entity for the villagers themselves, it is also a sub-system within the larger political, economic, social and religious system in which it exists. Socially, the village has never been an isolated unit as caste and kinship ties have extended beyond the village. The continuous interaction between the localised little traditions and the great traditions of Indian civilization take place through the double processes of universalisation and parochialisation. Traditionally, the village was not economically self-sufficient. Essential items like salt, cooking gas, metals, sugarcane, etc., were not produced in most of the villages and they had to visit weekly markets and towns for them. Again every village did not have all the essential artisan and servicing caste and there was mutual dependence between villages for this purpose. Processes of industrialisation and urbanisation since Independence especially, have made the village a part of the wider economic network. Politically, villagers governed themselves in day-to-day matters, but

the payments of revenue was a symbol of the village's dependence on the king, as the king protected against foreign invasions and maintained law and order in the area. Introduction of a uniform law and a centralised administration made the village a part of the wider political system of the country as British brought most of the country under their rule. Introduction of parliamentary democracy and adult franchise increased further the integration of the village with the different levels of the political system.

You may also like to see and hear Prof Jodka give an overview of the village and studies done on them. You may access the link to youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vl4ljMopY>

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4.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Henry Maine and Baden-Powell discussed village level conflict, regional variations of villages in terms of both structure and culture within India

Short essays providing brief accounts of individual villages were put together by M.N. Srinivas in the form of a book titled *India's Villages* in 1955. S.C. Dube published full length study of a village near Hyderabad, *Indian Village* in the same year.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Marriott (1955) refers to processes of universalization (elements of village culture being incorporated into a wider regional or even larger society) and parochialization (cultural elements of a pan-Indian nature filtering down to the village level through various modes of communication such as story-telling and folk drama).
- ii) Village exogamy is practice where marriage was to be with person who is not from the same village and who is outside the village.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) M.N. Srinivas in his study of village Rampura in Karnataka (1955) observes how World War-II brought increased cash for the dominant landowning Okkaliga caste with wartime rationing and shortages which encouraged black marketeering. The profits of the wartime were used for electrification, two rice mills were set up, bus lines were also started which made contact with Mysore City much easier.

Kathleen Gough's study of Kumbapettai village (1955), situated in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, dominant Brahmin group migrated to towns for education and employment and the immigration in Kumbapettai of lower castes from the neighbouring and less fertile areas was responsible for Kumbapettai coming in contact with the wider economic system.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Politically, villagers governed themselves in day-to-day matters, but the payments of revenue was a symbol of the village's dependence on the king, as the king protected against foreign invasions and maintained law and order in the area. Villagers also approached King's court for settlement of disputes.