

The Idea of the Village Community and British Administrators

This paper has less to do with 'The Indian village community' than with the ideas about such community to be found in the works of the British administrators. But I do not trace the history of the growth of the idea of the village community; for that I like to refer to Professor Louis Dumont's recent article in *The contributions to Indian sociology*.¹ What I now present to you is a foretaste of a fuller study of the ideas of Sir Henry Maine which I intend to write as a sequel to my work on Sir William Jones;² he was, like Maine, a lawyer, a scholar and an administrator in India.

Professor Dumont, in the article mentioned above, has taken Sir Henry Maine to task and criticised him for not taking advantage of his stay in India to use the evidence to develop his theory. Instead, according to Professor Dumont, Maine 'carried on the approach inaugurated in *Ancient Law* arbitrarily abstracting his community from the data and reducing it to those features which, he assumed, were characteristic of the pristine Indo-European community'.³ Maine had been criticised for theorising rather unwarrantedly on slender evidence by B. H. Baden-Powell as early as 1892.⁴ Baden-Powell reinforced his criticisms in 1896 and again in 1899 in his short work *The Origin and Growth of Village Communities in India*.⁵ There he pointed out that Maine was unaware of the tribal villages in the Punjab or the jat villages in the plains. In fact it is possible to show that Maine had abstracted from the evidence from one area only, that is the comparatively dense region of the North Western Provinces and Oudh. He must have learnt more about this area during his stay in Allahabad on his way to and from Simla, the summer capital. No doubt he had utilised other

¹ Louis Dumont, 'The village community from Munro to Maine' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no. 9, December 1966, pp. 67-89.

² Please see my book *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India*, Cambridge, 1968.

³ Louis Dumont, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁴ B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, Oxford, 1892, vol. 2, p. 104n; *idem.*, *The Indian Village Community*, London, 1896, pp. 5-7.

⁵ *The Origin and Growth of Village Communities in India* (2nd ed.), London, 1908, pp. 33-41.

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evidence such as the *Mirasi* report, Elphinstone's history, the works of George Campbell and the various minutes left by such administrators as Munro and Lawrence. However he could not use many new settlement reports, 'District Manuals', and *Gazetteers* giving detailed information about village history, the origins of customs and the land tenure systems, which came into existence only after 1870. Baden-Powell had brought this to our notice and Dumont agrees.⁶ I would agree with such criticisms of Maine as made by Dumont and earlier by Baden-Powell. But I intend to show that in the mid-Victorian colonial context it was difficult, if not impossible, to take a cold scientific view of Indian history and society.

It is often forgotten that early European scholars were not professional historians or anthropologists who spent most of their time on the university campus, only intermittently visiting record rooms or remote villages to study the kinship structure of some tribe or caste group. These early British scholars, unlike modern academics, were primarily administrators busy in their districts or provinces or departments. They had neither time nor inclination to make painstaking research before making bold generalisations about social institutions, customs and history. It was part of the Victorian life to be speculative, to be able to make bold generalisations without bothering too much about the details. What is perhaps more important is to remember that the British administrator-scholars were not an isolated group; they were involved in the political conflicts of the time and their theories about India and her history had a definite political slant.

It is a matter of common sense to recognise that in social sciences there is an intimate relationship between the subject and the object of study. But since it is a matter of common sense we often tend to overlook it; we forget that we do not just report bare facts, however detached we try to be; we evaluate them, we rearrange them according to our interest and our standpoint. Whatever we might think of the British administrator-scholars, they were not, to use Manheim's phrase, 'unanchored', 'coming from a relatively classless stratum'⁷ of society. They were fully 'anchored' and committed to uphold an authoritarian regime, and they had already formed *a priori* ideas about India and her civilisation, being fed on James Mill's *History* and Charles Grant's 'Observations'. Most administrators were busy at their own stations,

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 42; cf. Louis Dumont, *op. cit.*

⁷ Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London, 1954, p. 137.

only the speculative ones theorised about the nature of Indian society and the British role in India, partly to find a *raison d'être* for the authoritarian regime and partly to satisfy their intellectual appetite. It is not possible to isolate their theories about Indian history and society from their administrative positions and political ideas. I intend to show that the idea of the village community was an integral part of the political theory of Sir Henry Maine, particularly in relation to the British-Indian government.

I think at the outset we ought to assume that the Indian village community is more an idea than a fact. The image of the traditional Indian society that has been handed down to us by the British administrator scholars from Munro to Moreland is that of a stagnant society ruled by a despotic regime, with a large army of bureaucrats, over millions of peasants, living in fraternal self-sufficient communities, exercising their communal right of hereditary occupation of arable land, virtually independent of one another and of the central government. They were, to quote from Charles Metcalfe's picturesque minute, 'little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations'.⁸ They were exhibited as a classic example of the 'changelessness' of the Indian way of life in the rural areas: 'They seem to last where nothing else lasts, dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolution, but the village community remains the same.'⁹ In the light of modern research it is clear that such an image of the traditional India is too simplistic to be true. The works of such historians as D. D. Kosambi and I. Habib¹⁰ show that the villages were less self-sufficient than was made out. There is no evidence of communal ownership or redistribution of land and there was a pyramidal class structure even in the rural areas. However, it is clear, as Habib has pointed out, that 'there were some spheres outside that of production where the peasants of a village who usually belong to the same fraternity often acted collectively'.¹¹ One example of such collective action was the raising of 'financial pools' to pay off revenue due to the central government. The research done by the anthropologists confirms that of the historians.

⁸ Metcalfe's Minute on Revenue Administration to Select Committee, 1832, as in John Kaye, *Selection of Papers of Lord Metcalfe*, London, 1854.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, p. 104; I. Habib, *The agrarian system of Mughal India 1556-1707*, London, 1963, p. 125.

¹¹ I. Habib, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-4.

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While some, like Dumont and David Pocock, are willing to deny the villages any sociological existence: 'India, sociologically speaking is not made up of villages';¹² others, like Bailey, still consider the village as the very basic unit for sociological investigation in India.¹³ However, there is general agreement among anthropologists not to regard the Indian village as a self-sufficient unit isolated from the outside world. There are a number of factors which bring them into close contact with one another and with the world outside. All this leads one to conclude that the nineteenth-century view of the Indian village community is more an idea than a fact.

It is interesting to note that this image of the Indian village as a self-sufficient unit, and a form of land ownership, developed during the course of the nineteenth century. In fact, as Dumont has pointed out, the origin of the idea could be more or less precisely dated. It first appears in Thomas Munro's 'Report from Anantpur' in 1806.¹⁴ The idea figures prominently in the writings of a group of officers which include Munro, Wilks, Malcolm, Elphinstone, Metcalfe and Holt Mackenzie in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. They all shared their dislike of the system of government developed by Cornwallis; they had faith in the *ryotwari* system of land tenure in one form or another, and in a personal form of government rather than in an impersonal system. They were all directly or indirectly influenced by Burke and possibly by Rousseau, the two high priests of the so-called Romantic revolt in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Like the Romantic intellectuals they believed in social institutions which had grown 'naturally' and had survived. They were against those institutions which were installed suddenly by human 'artifice' like the French Revolution. In India they wanted to block the way of the Anglicisation of the administration and to protect, what they considered to be, the traditional institutions of India, particularly those which had survived despite the dynastic changes and political revolutions.¹⁵ No doubt the village communities were the foremost amongst them. Through their survival they had proved their worth. There is a passage in Mark Wilks's book which brings this point

¹² Dumont and Pocock, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no. 1, p. 25.

¹³ Bailey, *op. cit.*, no. 3, pp. 92-5.

¹⁴ 'Report from Anantpur of May 15, 1806', as quoted in Mark Wilks' *Historical Sketches of the South of India etc.* (2nd ed.), Madras, 1869, vol. 1, p. 139; also see Louis Dumont, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ A. Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (2nd ed.), London, 1960, pp. 53-9; cf. E. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford, 1963 pp. 8-25.

home very clearly. Wilks devoted one whole chapter of his book to the subject of proprietary rights in India. He came to the conclusion that private property in land was 'distinctly recognised by law' in India, but he considered the cultivators as the true owners of land in India. Such cultivators, he claimed, formed themselves into small village communities which were the true nature of the 'Indian constitution'; 'Every state in India is a congeries made of these little republics.' Cornwallis made a mistake in not recognising this 'true ancient Hindu constitution'. But he concluded: 'Happily in a large portion of the territory subject to the government of Fort St. George the question is still open to consideration: the rights which still exist are ripe for confirmation and those which have been partially or wholly usurped or destroyed may yet be restored...In this portion of India its ancient constitution may yet be revived. A company of merchants may confer a more solid benefit than was announced in the splendid proclamation of the Roman consul to the cities of Greece. Freedom in its most rational, safe and acceptable form may be proclaimed to the little republics of India.'¹⁶ It is significant to note that although there were in the eighteenth century a number of officers who were equally eager to rule India according to 'the Indian constitution', they did not consider the state in India to be a congeries of 'little republics'. It would seem that the British officers of the Munro school idealised the Indian villages to make a model of the 'Indian constitution' which corresponded with their Romantic conservative notion of an ideal polity. In other words, they used 'the village community' as a peg on which to hang a theory of British-Indian administration. This is an interesting topic in itself, an example of the inevitable entanglement between the subject and object of studies, between myth and reality.

Sir Henry Maine, like the Romantic British statesmen, made use of the idea of the village community to propel an historical and political thesis about the evolution of human institutions and about the future development of India. The story of his life is rather unexciting, if not dull; according to his official biographer, 'a drama in five acts without exciting scenes and startling incidents'.¹⁷ He was a delicate child, brought up by his mother, and had a brilliant career in Christ's Hospital and Pembroke College, but the busiest part of his life was spent in India as a law member in the Supreme Council of the Governor-General

¹⁶ Mark Wilks, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁷ M. E. Grant Duff, *Sir Henry Maine: A Brief Memoir of His Life*, London, 1892, p. 82.

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when some 209 acts were passed by the Council. Although he gathered a great deal of information from his conversations with such officers as Sir John Lawrence and George Campbell, a debt which he himself acknowledged,¹⁸ he had more faith in books than in men and never cared much for society. In India he spent very little time outside Calcutta and Simla; unlike modern anthropologists he had no faith in fieldwork or in obtaining information from the villagers themselves; 'I should feel much safer in applying the most sweeping theory of the great European thinkers on political economy or the most hurried generalisation of great Indian administrators than in acting on the opinion of ignorant and puzzled peasants on difficult questions in which they never had a practical interest.'¹⁹ He is rightly considered, along with Leackey and Stephen, as a Victorian critic of Democracy. Like them he had no faith in the common man. He looked upon the extension of suffrage in 1867 and again in 1884 with great suspicion. He opposed democracy for it threatened property, science and progress. He admired the American constitution for it provided safeguards for industrial and commercial property, a bulwark against democracy and socialism.²⁰ His name is often bracketed with that of Fitzjames Stephen as another Indian bureaucrat whose Indian experience had made him a confirmed authoritarian. It may be true that Fitzjames Stephen found the vindication of Hobbes' theory in the India of 1870,²¹ but Maine did not 'go hard with democracy', as John Morley had assumed, because of his career as an Indian bureaucrat.²² In his work, *Popular Government*, Maine supported Burke and shared with him his fear of innovations,²³ but in India he was not afraid of reforms through education and legislation. Undoubtedly his Indian experience reinforced his dislike of the common man, but he had gained faith in the progress of human institutions not only through the long evolutionary process, but also by human effort.

His political theory was based on his idea of history. To him history was a process of evolution of man from the family to the individual. As

¹⁸ Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West*. (3rd ed.) London, 1876, p. viii.

¹⁹ Minutes of 26 October 1866, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

²⁰ For a summary of the political ideas of Maine see B. E. Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy*, London, 1938, pp. 167-206.

²¹ Lippincott, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²² John Morley, 'Maine on popular government' in *Oracles on Men and Government*, London, 1923, p. 79.

²³ Lippincott, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-9.

Vinogradoff has pointed out, Maine was profoundly influenced by Darwinism and had faith in the evolutionary transition of social institutions from a society of hunters and fishers to a competitive capitalistic society, from status to contract: 'It is contract starting as from one terminus of history, from a condition of society in which all the relations of persons are summed up in the relations of Family, we seem to have steadily moved towards a social order in which all these relations arise from the free agreement of individuals.'²⁴ Somehow in Asia, more particularly in India, this evolution of institutions has not taken place; the growth there had been arrested at an early stage. If we travel eastwards from England or France, he thought, we not only travel in space, but also backwards in time: 'As we move eastwards through the German and Slavonic countries this primitive social organism grows stronger and stronger. It is plainly discernible under the superficial crust of Mussulman institutions, until in India it emerges in its most ancient form as the village community, a brotherhood of self-styled kinsmen settled on a space of land.'²⁵ Such village communities should be compared with Roman gens or Teutonic marks. In every single feature of the Indian village community 'the token of an extreme antiquity is discoverable'. The social state in rural India is barbarism, 'but it is barbarism either of the very family of mankind to which we belong or of races which have accepted its chief and most characteristic institutions. It is a barbarism which contains a great deal of our own civilisation'.²⁶ Europe no doubt had grown out of this barbarism whereas India had remained at that stage from time immemorial. This arrested growth is to be found in every feature of Indian life, in the absence of a legal system and a proper code of law, in the bondage of women, in the communal ownership of land and the village community. Even the 'feudalisation' of India was never complete.²⁷ The intense conservatism could be found in its extreme form among the great mass of Indians who hate and dread change.

But in India there is no need to overestimate the experience of the past and it is possible to make changes and bring the notion of progress to the 'oldest' member of the Indo-Aryan race. In fact Maine marvelled at the destiny which has brought 'one of the youngest branches of the

²⁴ Maine, *Ancient Law* (new edition), London, 1930, p. 181.

²⁵ *Idem.*, *Dissertations on Early Law and Custom*, London, 1883, pp. 326-7.

²⁶ *Idem.*, 'The effects of observation of India upon European thought', Rede lecture by Sir Henry Sumner Maine to Cambridge University in 1875, as published in *European View of India*, Calcutta, 1875, p. 11.

²⁷ *Idem.*, *Village communities*, p. 158.

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greatest family from the uttermost ends of the earth to renovate and educate the oldest'.²⁸ England should communicate the principles of progress to India and Maine saw 'no reasons why if it has time to work it should not develop in India effects as wonderful as on others of the societies of mankind'.²⁹ The principles of progress should be communicated to the natives through education and legislation.

Already in India the English universities and colleges had created a new educated class which found no difficulty in accepting the ideas of progress.³⁰ This is the reason why Maine supported Calcutta University and was opposed to the formation of a university in the Punjab, if they were to teach Punjabi and Pustu ('rude languages' having no chance of 'improvement in the near future') and Indian sciences — 'the science which places the world on a tortoise'.³¹ He opposed the abolition of the Bengal Legislative Council since Bengal stands by itself 'in respect of the character of the native population'. He thought that the moral and material progress of Bengal must not be impeded by the doubts of gentlemen acquainted 'with the less intellectual and less supple population of upper India'. Bengalis are more supple and intellectual because of the English education and because 'of the absence of institutions which were the basis of society in other parts of India'.³²

He also thought that changes could be brought to India through legislative measures, particularly those affecting the 'civil usages' and 'religious opinion'. He disclaimed that the Queen had, in assuming direct government, pledged in her Proclamation 'to surrender the power which was the sole justification for being in a country at all — power to improve its institutions'.³³ This is the reason why he did not oppose even 'innovations' in India. In Punjab he supported John Lawrence and Richard Temple: 'I say that even if these beneficial rights of occupancy were really planted in the Punjab by the British government, they have grown up and borne fruits under its shelter and that it is for its honour to give them up to ruthless devastation.'³⁴

²⁸ *Idem.*, *Address Delivered to the University of Calcutta on 17 March 1866*, Calcutta, 1866, p. 14.

²⁹ *Idem.*, *European Views of India*, p. 25.

³⁰ *Idem.*, *Popular Government* (Popular edition), London, 1909, pp. 132-3.

³¹ Minutes of 29 July 1868, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

³² 'Speech on the Bengal legislature', 27 February 1868, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

³³ Minute of 14 December 1886, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

³⁴ 'Speech on the Punjab Tenancy', 19 October 1868, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

However, he was against rapid changes and the sharing of power with Indians; India still needed British guidance for an indefinite period for the development of her institutions. He was against the introduction of popular self-government in the form of municipal committees in the North Western Provinces since free and fair elections could not be held in India.³⁵ He was against raising the age limit for examination of the Indian Civil Service which was demanded by the Indians.³⁶ He would not give power to junior Indian magistrates in mufassil areas to order European criminals to be flogged,³⁷ nor have uniformity of trial for natives and Europeans.³⁸ He preferred native chiefs to Bengali-educated classes of 'no extraordinary weight' to work in the Supreme Legislative Council. He pleaded to shift the capital permanently to Simla to attract the native princes.³⁹

Undoubtedly Maine produced a more subtle, less crude and less racist theory about the Indian civilisation and the role of Britain in India than James Mill had done. This is why his theory attracted a number of administrator-scholars like Sir Alfred Lyall.⁴⁰ But Maine's theory hinged on the idea that the Indian institutions had failed to grow after a certain stage of development largely because of India's isolation. The village community is a most important example of this arrested growth and the sole purpose of the British rule in India was to improve such institutions. In other words, the village community was used to propel a theory, to rationalise an authoritarian British rule in India for an indefinite period.

³⁵ 'Speech on the municipalities in the North-Western Provinces', 13 March 1868, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-5.

³⁶ Minute of 12 November 1875, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-11.

³⁷ Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁸ Henry Maine to Charles Wood 18 July 1864, Eur. F. 78. 114, 3A (I.O.L.).

³⁹ 'Speech on the Bengal legislature', 27 February 1868, as published in Duff, *op. cit.*, pp. 370-71.

⁴⁰ Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 27.