

Agrarian Modernity and Development in India

Agrarian Modernity and Development in India:

Postcolonial Rurality

By

Shibsankar Jena

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Dedicated to my grandmother (Buee)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many social scientists have theorized about "Indian modernity" from different perspectives. Their understanding of modernity in Indian society is multifaceted, encompassing both the structural readjustment of Indian tradition to modernity and the cultural and group features defining and redefining modernity in the context of state, democracy, and locality. In this regard, the sociological discourse on postcoloniality in India has unique sociological realities to examine, analyse, and explain. Social science perspectives on the power of modernity in light of traditional micro-level reflexive actors have been the subject of constant debate and discussion among academics since the colonial era. In this context, the theories, concepts, and methodologies require a duality in perspective and pluralism in methodology to understand, interpret, and analyse contemporary structure and agency in social, cultural, and economic change in post-independence India. Therefore, ethnography is an appropriate method to interpret the sense of agency in the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity in Indian society.

Given this context, this study used an ethnographic technique to comprehend and investigate the condition of modernity in the agrarian social structure of contemporary India. Many books have been written about the agrarian social transformation and the evolving mode of production, but the literature mostly ignores the significance of the cultural subjectivity defining and redefining agrarian modernity and agrarian capitalism. This study attempted to consider the agrarian question and the changing mode of production in contemporary India in a sociological manner, taking culture and social status as the two crucial variables in local agricultural performance. Status is one of the major sociological factors defining the social self in Indian society. In this sense, the agrarian self, the meaning of agrarian modernity and development, and the motivation for a new style of farming are largely associated with social status in Indian society. As such, farming is not only an economic activity but also a personality formation where status plays a significant role. As a result, the role of agrarian modernity and postcolonial subjectivity in contemporary rurality is complex, with impression management being an everyday practice in the agrarian lifeworld. Against this background, this study explored the inter-linkages between the agrarian cultural self, social

status through impression management and the multiple agrarian discourses in the context of the changing mode of production in contemporary postcolonial rurality.

This book is a modified form of my Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This research work has crossed so many challenges, obstacles, and problems, and at last has its final shape because of the continuous guidance, support, and motivation of my academic significant others, who are the real architects of this book. The fruitful supervision by Dr. Manoj Kumar Jena (CSSS, JNU) in the entire period of research; the intellectual input provided by Prof. B.B. Mohanty (Pondicherry University), Prof. B.K. Nagla (retired professor), and Dr. Srinivasan (CSSS, JNU); and the motivation that was injected by Dr. Shubash Ranjan Nayak (assistant regional director, IGNOU, Bhopal) for quality research were indispensable. My special thanks go to the late Prof. P.N. Mukherjee for simplifying the conceptual understanding of village and agrarian life in India in order to enrich my social science perspective on agrarian social structure and social relations. He helped me understand the mode of production in a sociological manner.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Human beings in whatever culture are provided with cognitive orientation in a cosmos: there is 'order' and 'reason' rather than chaos. There are basic premises and principles implied, even if these do not happen to be consciously formulated and articulated by the people themselves. We are confronted with the philosophical implications of their thought, the nature of the world of being as they conceive it. If we pursue the problem deeply enough we soon come face to face with a relatively unexplored territory—ethno-metaphysics. Can we penetrate this realm in other cultures? What kind of evidence is at our disposal? The problem is a complex and difficult one, but this should not preclude its exploration (Hallowell, 1960, 21 cited in Foster, 1965).

The nearly hundred-year-long debate over the agrarian question represents one of the most enduring controversies in modern sociology (Byres, 1995). Agricultural development under the state ideology of “high modernism”¹ in the 1960s and '70s in postcolonial India not only

¹ The term “high modernism” is defined by James Scott (1998) as a strong (one might even say muscle-bound) version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress associated with industrialization in Western Europe and North America, which modern states all over the world practice through the “developmental regime” ideology. In the postcolonial state's development discourse, “high modernism” refers to an attempt to reorder the workings of nature and society through various administrative mechanisms (Scott, 1998, 89), thereby drastically altering people's habits, work, living patterns, moral conduct, and worldview. At its centre was a supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress, the development of scientific and technical knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and, last but not least, an increasing control over nature (including human character) commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. “High modernism” is thus a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied—usually through the state—in every field of human activity. The avant-garde among engineers, planners, technocrats, high-level

produced the debate on mode of production but also created multiple discourses of agrarian behaviour in local farming subjectivity. In this sense, postcoloniality as a self-making subject of modernity through the power of development discourse produced scholarly discussions on the term “local” in the context of “global” in different terminology, such as “regional modernities”² (Shivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 2003), “alternative modernities”³ (Appadurai, 1991), and “multiple modernities”⁴ (Eisenstadt, 2000), all of which are existential phenomena in the micro-level “agriculture as performance”⁵ (Richard, 1989). Thus, to emphasize the multilevel genealogy of modernity in the colonial era reveals the fact that the “East” is not seen just as a geographical landscape for the growth of Western capitalism but also as a place to shape modernity as a postcolonial setting (Gupta, 1998, 9). These conditions in the postcolonial agrarian system have been a special site of cultural investigation of the

administrators, architects, scientists, and visionaries were its main carriers and exponents (Scott, 1998, 89–90).

² The production of modernities occurs in sites with variable spatial and relational features that become meaningful when questioning the monopolistic, hegemonic, and monolithic connotations of Euro-centric modernity. In this sense, spatial and relational imply the social and discursive sites where the production of modernity occurs through the constitutive effects of political, institutional and cultural processes upon a region’s formation and development. In this sense, it has been argued that the regional is neither reducible to an empirical given nor merely a “container” for social processes. It should be seen in terms of the practices of individuals and institutions at a variety of spatial levels (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 2003, 13–14).

³ Alternative modernity negates the Eurocentric version of modernity and argues that modernity can be conceptualized from a transnational and trans-cultural perspective.

⁴ The idea of “multiple modernities” presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world—to explain the history of modernity—is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern (Eisenstadt, 2000, 2).

⁵ “Agriculture as performance” refers to farming behaviour based on the experience of what happened to a specific farmer on a specific piece of land in a specific year, not an attempt to implement the general theory of inter-species ecological complementarity (Richard, 1989, 39–40).

agrarian economy by researchers in contemporary India in particular and South Asia in general.

The agrarian transition under the discourse of the “disappearance thesis”⁶ and the “permanence thesis”⁷ is one of the important debates in the sociology of agrarian studies to understand and explore various dimensions of the expansion of capitalism in local agricultural societies. The Malthusian anxiety about “high production” in response to Ehrlich’s (1968) population bomb and the development of biochemical agricultural knowledge by MAP (Mexican Agricultural Programme) scientist Norman Borlaug has resulted in a successive saga involving the Green Revolution (particularly in Mexico and India), where the science of food grain production won the race against biological human reproduction. The Bengal famine of 1943, in which nearly two million people died, the famine of 1965 caused by bad weather, the Indo-China War (on which half of the budget in the third five-year plan was spent), and the declining mortality rate combined with a total fertility at 5.93 percent per year placed India in the third stage of “demographic transition.” This forced the country to adopt a new agricultural strategy and depart from the Nehruvian ideology of “institutionalism.” These ecological, political, and biological factors led to the Indian state reordering the local agricultural society through the power of hybrid varieties, developed by MAP scientists in association with the Rockefeller Foundation of the United States. In this sense, the nineteen-sixties and ’70s were a turning point in India’s journey of democracy and development as India’s Five-Year planning ideology on agricultural development shifted towards an individual decision-making approach, with state incentives for farmers to use scientific knowledge and technology through high-yield varieties for the rapid growth of agricultural surplus.

Thus, the postcolonial state approach to the agrarian question under the different political-economic conditions of post-independence India not only produced scholarly debate but also created the conditions of postcolonial subjectivity in local agricultural practices with the state-

⁶ Some scholars argue that the expansion of capitalism and the growth of the industrial market will lead to the complete disappearance of the peasantry from the countryside. Thus, directly or indirectly, sooner or later, the peasant will be transformed into industrial wage workers or capitalist farmers.

⁷ The permanence thesis, contrary to the disappearance thesis, believes the peasant economy has its own developmental logic and does not abide by the logic of industrial capitalism, which leads to the survival of “peasantry” and the continuous reproduction of the “peasant economy” in the countryside.

sponsored homogenization of agricultural modernization. In this context, the agrarian question is defined as economic development entailing agrarian structural transformations, with the central problem being the creation of agrarian capitalism while also focusing on the transformation of resources from agriculture to the industrial economy. In this scenario, the agrarian transformation has been addressed or attempts have been made to resolve it in a variety of ways throughout history. The appropriation and transfer of resources from agriculture is one strategy to achieve agrarian transformation. Although this strategy reduces agricultural output, it was embraced by the majority of the country.⁸ The other option is to invest in science, technology, infrastructure, and agricultural research, with government intervention in terms of agriculture-non-agriculture trade (especially between fertilizer and rice), depending on the sort of landholding system and policy choices affecting the interaction between town and country dimensions (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 63).

There are two major phases of resolving the agrarian question in postcolonial India: first, the Nehruvian approach towards institutional transformation; second, technology and biochemical agricultural practices. Because of the “colonial mode of production,”⁹ India’s agricultural

⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa followed this approach, where the government tried to fund a process of accumulation by taxing export agriculture through the state marketing board, which led to the decline of agricultural output and an economic crisis (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 63).

⁹ Hamza Alavi (1975) conceptualized “mode of production” as a coherent structure of social relations of production in which each mode of production has a class of exploited producers and a corresponding class of exploited non-producers (Alavi, 1975). The structural formation of the “mode of production” determines the need for a particular class of exploited producers. In this vein, the colonial mode of production was determined by the characteristics of colonial governance on which the social relations of production were based. Chandra (1972) argues that the colonial mode of production in India reveals the fact that it integrated the Indian economy into the world capitalist economy in a subordinate position and with a peculiar international division of labor. In the years after 1760, when Britain was developing into the leading capitalist country in the world, India was being underdeveloped into becoming the “leading” backward colonial country in the world. In fact, the two processes were interdependent in terms of cause and effect. The entire structure of economic relations between India and Britain, involving trade, finance, and technology, continuously developed India’s colonial dependence and underdevelopment (Chandra et al., 1972, 16). The basic fact is that the same social, political, and economic processes that produced industrial

economy was much lower than elsewhere in the early 20th century. The *London Economist*, on August 16th, 1947, expressed the hope that “the energy of new governments (both India and Pakistan) will be concentrated on the fundamental question of increasing agricultural production” (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 10). But under the Nehruvian ideology of “industry-first” and socio-economic justice to solve the problems of “unequal agrarian relations,”¹⁰ “agricultural development and the expansion of capitalistic agriculture” were overlooked in the first three five-year plans. In this sense, during the 1950s and 1960s, the approach taken by the Nehruvian regime was to improve agricultural performance “on the cheap,” where institutional reforms were given prime importance rather than investment in improved technology and agricultural infrastructure (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000).

In the first five-year plan (1951–56), through the recommendations of the Agrarian Reforms Committee,¹¹ emphasis was given to distributional

development and social and cultural progress in Britain also produced and then maintained economic underdevelopment and social and cultural backwardness in India because Britain subordinated the Indian economy to its own economy and determined the basic social trends in India according to its own needs. The result was the stagnation of India’s agriculture and industries, exploitation of its peasants and workers by the Zamindars, landlords, princes, moneylenders, merchants, capitalists, and the foreign government and its officials, and the spread of poverty, disease, and semi-starvation underdevelopment (Chandra et al., 1972, 24). To sum up, India underwent commercial transportation and not an industrial revolution. The trend was not towards an independent capitalist economy but a dependent and underdeveloped colonial economy (Chandra et al., 1972, 22).

¹⁰ In the early 1950s, the bottom 61 percent of households owned only 8 percent of total land, while the top 5 percent owned 41 percent (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 64). The first village study conducted by the Agro-Economic Research Center for Eastern India in 1955-56 revealed the highly unequal distribution of land, and the landlordism and concentration of wealth in a few households. The study reported that in the village of Sahajpur, in the Bhirbhum district of West Bengal, about 60 percent of all the land was limited to four households of the 133 households in the village. In this context, Thorner (1956) viewed the complex of legal, economic, and social relations uniquely typical of the Indian countryside as producing an effect he recognized as a “built-in depressor” (Thorner, 1956, 16). He was referring to agrarian production conditions which made it profitable for landlords and other rural big men to live by appropriating rents, charging usurious interest, reaping speculative trading profits from the impoverished mass of peasantry, and limiting the possibilities of productivity-raising investment.

¹¹ The *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee* in 1949 suggested radical reforms of the intermediary rights and tenure introduced by the colonial

justice for the economic inequality prevailing in the agrarian social structure of India and the establishment of village-based cooperative farming. Thus, the land reforms and the other innovative programmes, like community development programmes, cooperative societies, and Panchayati Raj, came into effect. Agriculture was treated as a “bargain basement” in the second five-year plan (1956–61), with the assumption that agricultural growth through institutional changes required little investment of resources (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 60). The persistence of “the depressor” (Thorner, 1956) because of the failure of land reforms, the famine in the 1960s, the Indo-China War, and a high population growth rate resulted in the failure of Nehruvian institutionalism to resolve the agrarian question in India.

The death of Nehru marked a great transformation in India’s traditional agrarian society. With the suggestion of Agricultural Minister C. Subramaniam, the then Prime Minister Lalbahadur Shastri introduced a new agricultural strategy to resolve the agrarian question through the modernization of agriculture. In the fourth five-year plan, India’s agricultural policy centered on investment in infrastructure, the use of fertilizer, high-yield varieties, and improved technology for the growth of agricultural output. This new agricultural strategy was based on the idea of agricultural modernization with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States. In this context, the state ideology of reordering “cultural cognition” and institutional behaviour among the general agrarian masses links development narratives and postcolonial conditions. Agriculture becomes a special discourse in postcolonial developmental states like India, where local farming practices, institutional knowledge, and agrarian relations are in a continuous process of state intervention to transform the traditional agrarian subjectivity into a modern farmer. In this process, narrative strategies characterize the agrarian questions in postcolonial India under the influence of local, national, and global political-economic conditions.

government in India’s rural society. The report also suggested the establishment of village-based cooperative farming. That suggestion was debated in the 1950s and was put forward again in the “Resolution on Agricultural Organizational Pattern” put before the annual meeting of Congress at Nagpur. But the leaders like Charan Singh heavily criticized the idea. Nehru moved back from the idea by saying in Lok Sabha in February 1959, “There is no question of coercion” (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000, 65). This marked the failure of the Nehruvian institutional measures to resolve the agrarian question in India.

Against this background, the academic debates and discussions on the state's ideological intervention towards the agrarian transformation and the growth of agricultural output (both the raw materials and food crops) have a significant sociological understanding of “structure and agency” relationships in the rural agrarian social system. The exploration of multiple agricultural discursive practices as an essence of local “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991) in micro-level agrarian society in contemporary India has a significant theoretical intervention in the understanding of the “structure and agency” relationship in the local “agriculture as performance” in the agricultural developmental regime. Against this background, this study has tried to explore the role of culture and social structure as an important variable in the making of local farming personalities, in the shaping of the agrarian lifeworld, and in developing the new hybrid cultural values in the farming communities. Thus, by taking culture and institutions as the most important factors between human-land relationships, it is easy to understand the land as a subjective category, where “state-directed development policies”¹² (especially in agriculture) become the subjective perception by the local actors, and where conflict, cooperation, and resistance are a continuous process between the external agrarian epistemology and the local peasant “cognitive map” (Bailey, 1966). This cultural understanding of land also helps to intervene in the mode of production debate by taking culture as an important “variable for analysis”.¹³

¹² The state-directed development policies refer to the various strategies adopted by the modern state like scientific knowledge on agricultural productivity, science and technology, hybrid seeds, modern irrigation systems and harvesting methods that are bound with a unique monoculture in agriculture, and this can be recognized as state culture (scientific agricultural knowledge), in contrast to the local indigenous knowledge, which includes traditional-based agricultural knowledge and practices. The main argument behind these policies is to completely reorder the local culture of agriculture.

¹³ The mode of production of debate in Indian agriculture is primarily related to the class structure, land use concerning profit maximization, tenancy, investment and reinvestment, nature of labour productivity, etc., which are primarily economic and social in character. The debate ignores the role of culture and peasant cognitive map in analyzing the expansion of capitalism in Indian agriculture. In contrast to the Marxian analysis of capitalism, Max Weber (1921) argues that non-economic factors also play a significant role in the economic changes of a society. According to this hypothesis, it can be said that the cultural perception of agricultural landscapes in Indian society is also a significant factor in the articulation of modes of production in Indian agricultural sectors. There, the local actors have a dialogue

In the words of Norman Wirzba (2010), “agrarianism” is comprehensive peasant cognition based on the in-depth relationship between man and his environment that shapes the culture of the agrarian landscape. Thus, “agrarianism” refers to “sustained, practical, and intimate engagement between the power and creativity of both nature and humans”. While the economic, political, and even social importance of land in the lives of rural agrarian communities have become accepted axioms in South Asian scholarship, the questions and details about the cultural dimensions of land have largely been ignored (Vasavi, 1998, 6). There is now a large body of literature available to rural agrarian society and its transformation from pre-colonial to colonial and postcolonial. This literature¹⁴ deal with the social structure and land relationships in postcolonial development discourse,¹⁵ but very few reports¹⁶ deal with the conflict and contradictions in local culture, farmers' subjective perceptions of their agrarian landscape, and modern agricultural practices. There is an ongoing debate among social science

with the external development agencies through local cultural knowledge or, as Miller (1995) says, the articulation of local agrarian ontologies with state-directed policies. The existence of conflict, cooperation, and accommodation are the major factors for having a fresh look at the mode of production debate.

¹⁴ Studies by Beteille (1974), Chopra (1994), and Savyasaachi (1993) recognize the close links between agriculture and social structure but ignore the significance of the cultural value of land in the face of changes induced by modern forces.

¹⁵ The central argument is that several works of literature are now available on the political and economic characteristics of land and society relationships. This literature reflects the agrarian social structure in relation to land, class formation, and the dynamics of the mode of production (debate on the mode of production in the changing scenario of agriculture in Indian society by both Indian and foreign intellectuals is basically centered around the basic fundamental question of whether Indian agriculture is marching towards capitalism or still within the semi-feudal mode of production), and the emerging dominant caste and caste politics concerning land. But there is little literature on the socio-anthropological perspective of agricultural land (i.e., how land is signified as a cultural category in Indian rural society) is available, or how the cultural complex of a society inflects human-land relationships. Or how the land reflects the cultural character in which it is physically and socially embedded. Such recognition of the subjective perception of land raises questions about the mode of production debate in India.

¹⁶ One of the major works by A.R. Vasavi (1998) on the cultural understanding of the agrarian environment and the rein in local farmer's agrarian discourse and the gradual transformation and hybridity of the agricultural landscape in Bijapur district under the postcolonial development process highlights the role of culture in the local mode of production.

scholars about “materialist” versus “culturalist”¹⁷ approaches to understanding institutional behaviour and socio-cultural change processes and dealing with economic action and the values, beliefs, and motivations that are attached to that action. Though the debate between culturalists and materialists has its own logic, there is a complete absence of true dialogue (Perlin 1988). This study is based on the ethnographic understanding of the inter-linkages and interrelations between the material and cultural aspects of the mode of production in a dryland agrarian society.

The Conceptual Discourse on Culture

Culture is made up of symbols that represent meaning. Culture includes beliefs and practices. It persists in people’s language, collective memory, and storytelling, as well as the rituals in the everyday lives of individuals (Geertz, 1973). These are the symbolic means by which social interaction, inter-subjectivity, and community thinking operate (Hannerz, 1969, 184). The analysis of culture is the essence of ethnographic research, carrying with it anthropological debate on how culture is understood and communicated to a wider audience. The debate in the discipline of anthropology is whether the understanding of culture and exploring the symbolic meaning of cultural behaviour should be undertaken from a materialist perspective or through a symbolic understanding that stresses interpretation. Marvin Harris and Clifford Geertz have explained culture from these two different perspectives.

The research strategy of cultural materialism was first given its name – *cultural* – to denote the associations with anthropology and *materialism* to indicate the priority accorded to the material conditions as identified by Harris (1981) as the demographic, technological, economic, and environmental infrastructure. For Harris, the *emic*¹⁸ and *etic*¹⁹ perceptions

¹⁷ Over the last twenty years, the cultural economy has become one of the special domains of study on culture in shaping modern capitalism. In this sense, the cultural economy has challenged the mainstream political economy in its understanding of the two exclusive categorical spheres of “culture” and “economy” and has established a theory that both culture and economy are inclusive of each other and there is deep imbrication between the two.

¹⁸ The *emic* approach investigates how local people think, perceive, and categorize based on their meaning, imagination, and explanation of things.

¹⁹ An *etic* approach is a culturally neutral perspective based on the description of a behaviour or belief by a social researcher’s observation that can be applied across cultures without ethnocentric, political, or cultural biases.

form two distinct yet convergent realms of reality. He insisted that while both perspectives were valid, the discipline of anthropology should be based on the scientific temperament by emphasizing the *etic* logic of material processes. Anthropologists have a responsibility to explore cultural truths, including values, beliefs, and practices, of groups and communities from within. But this is only half the truth. In order to have complete knowledge of the culture of different groups and communities, one has to go through the objective study of culture and history (Harris, 1981, 15). Harris believes that the *etic* perspective gives a valid methodological perspective for an objective understanding of the socio-cultural practices of a community and for cross-cultural study. In this sense, a cultural materialistic perspective develops a demographic, technological, and environmental explanation for cultural variation that occurs in the structure and superstructure of community cultural values, behaviour, and practices. Although cultural materialism offers a sound method for the investigation of the meaning of cultural practices, the absolute duality between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives unduly reflects the native worldviews from that of the researcher. The *etic* perspective presumes that the local community or people lack a “scientific” understanding of cultural construction within a given geographical region, and it is up to the outsider to see the inner workings of a cultural system. Because insiders’ explanations are merely the skins that material forces are wrapped in, culture and human creativity become superficial facades that are ultimately constructed out of the local confluence of material forces. In opposition to this conceptual understanding, the symbolic perspective of the study of culture helps to overcome the negligence of strong supporters of the materialistic understanding of culture. The essence of “symbolic” is the “root and fundamental to individual action” (White, 1949, 22–39).

The symbolic perspective argues that culture is inherent in human behaviour by which individuals recognize things with a meaningful structure (White 1959, 235–236). In this sense, “everyday action is a meaningful action, a story they tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz, 1973, 448). Such cultural narratives lie outside the realm of positivist science and instead must be approached from an exploration of the social context. Based on the Weberian interpretive understanding of social action, Geertz argues that culture is deeply rooted with so many meaningful actions and emotions that can’t be understood through the positivistic philosophy of universal laws but needs an interpretive approach in search of the meaning of the action (Geertz 1973, 5). For

Geertz, a culture is a “stock of knowledge” of a particular society, and the cultural symbols act as a “model of”²⁰, guiding and shaping human psycho-social behaviour in everyday life. Therefore, Geertz developed a valid ethnographic approach in cultural studies by offering a “thick description” to interpret the cultural logic of human action that emphasizes these webs of significance, a symbolic approach that provides a holistic understanding of culture and human behaviour that unfolds the story of people’s everyday lives. Such a humanistic perspective must inherently be “concerned with human life and experience and continue to affect a voice that allows us to communicate those experiences that, although born of specific cultural circumstances, nonetheless transcend culture and enhance our sensibility and awareness of the human condition” (Grindal 1993, 47). By recreating the cultural context within which a social act occurs, a symbolic interpretation of culture breathes life into the ethnographic account and can create a meaningful account for both the scholarly audience and those approaching it from the indigenous worldview (Bloch 1992, 127–8).

This emphasis on the symbolic interpretation of the study of culture fails to give proper deference to the material processes developing a cultural system. Without an understanding of and analyzing the material canvas on which people develop their webs of significance and worldviews, the understanding gained through ethnographic research is inherently limited by the inspiration of the researcher. A researcher's concern for keeping a detailed record of the material phenomenon while in the field is a necessary activity for creating an account of discovering the meaning of a cultural system. When ethnography is built on a foundation

²⁰ To understand how these symbols shape public behavior, Geertz’s distinction between “model of” and “model for” is an important conceptual intervention to understand human action and cognition. The “model of” refers to the manipulation of symbolic structures to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with pre-established non-symbolic structures. Symbols are the vehicles of conception and comprise meaning. The meaning produced through the process of social interaction. According to Geertz, symbols have the social construction of meaning only when people agree that a particular symbol is going to be used to refer to a particular thing. Hence, a symbol is something that stands for something else. The development of culture thus depends upon the development of a consensus of meaning for the symbols used to which Alfred Schutz (1967) recognized as “shared world”. The ability to develop culture (and religion) and to transmit culture (and religion) stems primarily from another human character-man’s ability to manipulate symbols and to engage in symbolic interaction.

of tangible observations, the audience can draw their own conclusions about the validity of the anthropologist's argument as it unfolds. To mediate this tension at the core of the discipline, a cultural understanding that draws on the strengths of both approaches is required. These two contradictory perspectives can be developed through a synthesis understanding of the symbolic interpretation of culture based on the observation of the material world (Bloch 1992, 144). In this context, the analysis of "value" is an essential systematic intervention to explore the meaning of cultural embeddedness in the material life of any human society. The value of culture develops the motivation for action in any social system (Parsons, 1951). In this sense, the unification of symbolic and materialistic perspectives into a cohesive methodological orientation is the essence of ethnographic research to understand the holistic understanding of value in a culture. Value develops people's "cognitive worldview" and "logic of practices" within a subjective lifeworld where the "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1980) is maintained through a "cultural ethos" of routinised activities in the institutional "field for performance". In this sense, value acts as a mediator between the mental narrative of the individual and the way they choose to interact with socio-ecological dynamism. Thus, value in any cultural system maintains a dual role. First, it prescribes the culturally appropriate course of action for the individual. Second, it describes the range of outcomes that may result from the prescribed course of action (Gregory, 1997, 12). Therefore, value is the standard that people use to evaluate the significance of their actions in a cultural context (Graeber, 2001, 47). In this way, value becomes the means through which the inherent "potency" of people to transform society becomes manifest in concrete forms (Munn, 1986).

Culture in the Agrarian Social System

Steward (1949) developed a theoretical understanding of the "culture and environmental linkages from a very organic perspective." In his understanding, he emphasized that the adaptation of social institutions is based on the requirements for the subsistence of the particular geographical and environmental setting (Steward, 1949, 24). This conception of culture signifies that social activities have a causal relationship with the search for livelihood and the subsistence of individual interaction with the environment (Murphy, 1981, cited in Silverman 1983, 19). Within peasant societies, farming is more than merely an economic behaviour that separates "work" from other spheres of socio-cultural living. Rather, the socio-anthropological interpretation of

the classical literature on peasant society and the term “peasantry” (Kroeber, 1958; Redfield, 1956) implies that farming households in peasant societies function as semi-autonomous hubs related to perpetuating the processes of production and consumption needed to reproduce society in a particular environment. The structure of the peasant community functions in a local setting. In other words, it must include the different peasant communities in which peasants live (Wolf, 1955, 455). In this sense, “community and social life” are much more important than economic life in a peasant society. Thus, the peasant economy is based on subsistence rather than reinvestment, where structural relations play a significant role in defining peasant society as “part-cultures” (Wolf, 1955).

This continual maintenance of basic social functions significantly shapes farming behaviour as a vehicle for the expression of the values that a particular peasant culture holds. Farming allows individuals to engage with local laws of “work of nature” (Baskin, 1997), and it shapes the cultural understanding of a “good and bad life” (Bailey, 1966). Conversely, this process not only causes nature to be moulded to meet human concerns but also makes use of the environment to transform society. Thus, the human-nature relationships in the peasant farming system develop diverse cultural aspects, such as economics, people's relationships with the land, conceptions of time, and how farming works to shape the peasant farmers' identity. Though small-scale farmers practice a tradition handed down through the generations, their way of life is not static. They continually adapt their methods to the changing times while holding on to the central values of traditional ways of life. These unique and diverse traditions provide an avenue for understanding the “paramount reality”²¹ (Schutz, 1962) of values in a social world, as illustrated through ethnographic investigations grounded in the material world.

The traditional livelihoods of peasant societies are facing an increasingly international economic order. Many of their traditional socio-cultural-centric economic behavioural ethics contradict the neoliberal

²¹ According to Schutz, everyday life is a “paramount reality” because the individual's biological survival depends on it. For that, individual have to live, interact and actively take part in their daily life. The “paramount” reality defined by Schutz “stands out as paramount over the many other sub-universes of reality. It is the world of physical things, including my body; it is the realm of my locations and bodily operations; it offers resistances which require effort to overcome; it places tasks before me, permits me to carry through my plans, and enables me to succeed orto fail in my attempt to attain my purposes” (Schutz, 1962, 226–227).

expectations of maximizing individual profit. In this sense, the postcolonial states under the influence of global commercial agriculture treat peasants as backward and incapable of adapting to the changing nature of agriculture to agribusiness. These attitudes are founded on the Western logic of modernization of agriculture that fails to take into account the prevalence of alternate systems of value. Through an analysis of these values, diverse ways of life can be understood as rational within the context of their culture. This study examined an anthropological and sociological interpretation of value and applied this framework to an ethnographic account of peasant economic and social practices and their relationship to the wider “economic and political sphere”.²² By defining the discrete values at work in these societies, the dense web of connections between various aspects of peasant life can be unravelled through a detailed cultural analysis. Agriculture is perceived as an economic activity embedded in the culture of rural social groups (Rajasekaran and Warren, 1991). Institutional knowledge and practice in agriculture take various forms because of the diverse natural, cultural, and historical nature of the environment. These forms are recognized as *agrarian systems* (Mazoyer and Roudart, 1996), and the local “substantial ethos” shapes agrarian behaviour (Vasavi, 1998) with a particular “value” orientation. The terms “agriculture” and “agricultural system” are used in ecology, environment, and human interactions that develop a systemic course of economic activity and the social relations of production in the “style of farming” (van der Ploeg, 1994).

A conceptual distinction is drawn between farming culture and industrial agriculture (Kimbrell, 2002). *Industrial agriculture* refers to large-scale, hi-tech agrarian systems as enacted by big national or transnational enterprises that control a major share of the global market for agricultural commodities. Farming and industrial agriculture are different in many aspects (scale of production, technology, management). In particular, they differ in terms of three major factors: *financial capital* – the magnitude and density of financial capital invested in industrial agriculture are incommensurable to every farming enterprise, no matter how developed and affluent they may be; *social capital* – farming agriculture is largely organized by rural social institutions and controlled

²² Here, the wider economic and political sphere refers to the various development programmes and schemes introduced by the government towards both rural and agricultural development. Through this process, a continuous process of negotiation is going on between the peasant lifeworld with the external agencies of development.

by people living in the countryside, and, very often, on farms. Vice versa, industrial agriculture is ruled by people, organizational structures, and processes that are primarily located and generated in the city (Mazoyer and Roudart, 1996); and *cultural capital* – the most modernized forms of farming embed (at least in a residual form) values, knowhow, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour that are part of rural (local) cultural capital. On the other hand, agro-industrial corporations' values, knowhow, attitudes, and forms of cultural capital are primarily generated in urban business schools, biotech faculties, national cultures, and global-thinking feed behaviours. Unlike industrial agriculture, farming is thus intimately connected with *ruralness*, i.e., the economic, social, and cultural conditions of people living in the countryside. Indeed, for most of humankind's history, farming has materially sustained rurality, which made farming socially viable and culturally meaningful (Mazoyer and Roudart 1996; Warren 2002). Even though during the second half of the 20th century, socio-economic development and the rise of industrial agriculture have created a progressively widening gap between ruralness and farming, this is still true in many areas of the world, including enclaves of countryside in developed countries. Thus, any discourse on the cultural capital generated by agriculture is primarily a discourse on the articulation between farming and ruralness. The culture of agriculture is also closely related to the environment. Thus, the agricultural practices of the different regions vary according to the specific ecological context, and so create a culturally shaped “locality” (Beteille, 1974) and regional identity.

Peasant Cultural Subjectivity

Eric Hobsbawm (1994) stated that in the second half of this century, the death of the peasantry because of the extreme form of global capitalism was the most dramatic change in the world. This claim is controversial, but it reflects the changes in the form of the peasant economy as well as the peasant society with the expansion of modern capitalism. Thus, the “peasant and the formation of the peasantry” is an endlessly debatable topic in the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology. The definition of a “peasant” can be categorized into three broader senses. In the first category, the historical definition of “peasant” emphasizes the social set-up in which peasant communities are shaped into estate-like or caste-like social groups with limited geographical and social mobility, rights, and obligations. The second definition of peasant society is based on various sociological and anthropological studies of peasant

communities around the world. In the third category, the peasant definition is shaped by various socio-political movements and the self-identity that develops within the peasant communities in the process of negotiation between the modern state, the peasant community, and the various development opportunities.

According to Shanin (1987), “the understanding and explanation of any peasant community without external relations are miscomprehension or caricatures. The rapid enhancement of external relations or ties has made the peasant community more central in defining the peasant community of any society” (Shanin, 1987, 8). Definitions of “peasantry” must, therefore, be as varied, as changing, and as much subject to debate under the discourse of peasant studies and village or rural studies²³ and these changing concepts of the peasant are closely linked to the varying concept of culture. In this sense, “peasant” is categorized and conceptualized as an “anthropological understanding of community culture and economy and its linkages with the social structure, social relations, kinship structure, and village community as a whole”.²⁴ In the neoliberal economy, the global flow of capital, technology, and international market expansion has created both new opportunities and

²³ Most scholars considered “peasant studies” as “rural and village studies” after the analytical definition of “peasant” given by Robert Redfield. For these scholars, the villagers may or may not be described as “peasant”; the term is rarely defined but is used as if it were self-exploratory, with the common dictionary meaning of rustics who work inland. The works on R. Redfield’s *Tepoztlan: A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life*; Chan Kom: *A Study of Maya Village* (with Villa Rojas); *The Irish Countryman and Family and Community Life* (with Kimball); Chapman’s *Milocca: A Sicilian Village*; Embree’s *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village*; Lewis’s *Life in a Mexican Village*; Foster’s *Empire’s Children: The People of Tzintzuntzan* centralized their study of peasant society as rural or village studies.

²⁴ The community-study approach to settlement that would later be described as “peasant” was the product of links between certain trends in sociology and functionalist anthropology. This advancement was essentially a civilized-nation extension of the functionalist enterprise, which both Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski saw as the construction of a universal science. Anthropological field methods could be applied to the small, bounded unit of a “community,” and the “holism” of Malinowski’s “culture” and Radcliffe-Brown’s “social structure” guided the inclusion of “all details of the community’s life within an integrated social study”. With this linkage, Robert Redfield (1946) also defined “folk society” as including both societal and cultural dimensions of such communities, where “folk society” and “folk culture” were not systematically distinguished but were used interchangeably or simply according to preference (Silverman 1983, 8–9).