



Rethinking Caste and Village Studies: A Critical Examination of Theoretical Frameworks and Field Realities

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ABSTRACT

Indian village studies have been largely influenced by caste-based theories. In the 20th century, scholars analyzed village community through structural-functionalism, linking caste to traditional occupations and social stratification. However, a critical examination of fieldwork data from M. N. Srinivas, K. Ishwaran, and Kathleen Gough reveals significant contradictions between theoretical assumptions and empirical realities. While scholars argue that caste determines occupation and hierarchical status, actual field data challenges this claim.

This study reassesses dominant theoretical perspectives in village studies and highlights the discrepancies between caste and stratification theories and real-world observations. By juxtaposing theoretical arguments with empirical findings, this article underscores the need for alternative frameworks that more accurately capture the complexities of Indian rural society.

Keywords: Indian Village Studies, Caste System, Structural-Functionalism, Social Stratification, Occupation and Hierarchy, Empirical Contradictions, Rural Society, Theoretical Critique

Background

India has long been recognized as a land of villages, with rural settlements forming the backbone of its social and economic structure. Even today, nearly 68% of the country's population resides in villages, making the study of rural India a crucial area of research.¹ Over the past two centuries, scholars from various disciplines have examined Indian villages through different theoretical lenses. Some portray villages as stagnant, backward spaces²—"sinks of localism"³—that hinder progress and modernization. Others take a contrasting view, idealizing villages as self-sufficient,⁴ harmonious, and culturally rich spaces untouched by external influences.

However, these interpretations are often shaped by Western theoretical frameworks, particularly structural-functionalism, which assume a rigid, caste-based social structure where occupation and status are fixed. Scholars such as M.N. Srinivas, K. Ishwaran, and Kathleen Gough have attempted to apply these models to explain caste, occupation, and social stratification in villages. Yet, a closer examination of their fieldwork data reveals contradictions that challenge these theoretical assumptions. While these scholars argue that caste

¹ "68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN" *Development of Economic and Social Affairs*, 2018,

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>. Accessed 26 August 2021.

² Jodhka, S. S. (2002). Nation and village: Images of rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. *Economic and political weekly*, 3343-3353.

³ Kumar, N., & Team. (2013). Ambedkar Villages An Alternative to Village Development: Case Studies from Lucknow. *Voice of Dalit*, 6(1), 9-24.

⁴ Srinivas, M. N., & Shah, A. M. (1960). The myth of self-sufficiency of the Indian village. *Economic weekly*, 12(37), 1375-1378.

determines occupational roles and hierarchical status, their field observations demonstrate significant variation, raising questions about the accuracy of these models.

1. Research Gap and Contribution

Existing studies on Indian villages have largely relied on Western theoretical models, particularly structural-functionalism, to explain caste, occupation, and stratification. These frameworks assume a rigid and hierarchical social structure, where caste determines occupation and status in a fixed manner. However, a critical analysis of fieldwork conducted by scholars such as M.N. Srinivas, K. Ishwaran, and Kathleen Gough reveals significant contradictions between theoretical assumptions and empirical realities. While these scholars argue that caste dictates occupational roles and social stratification, their own field data demonstrates considerable variation, challenging these predefined models. Despite this, mainstream village studies continue to impose rigid theoretical categories, failing to account for the fluidity of caste-based roles and the shifts in rural hierarchy over time.

This paper addresses this gap by critically reassessing dominant perspectives in Indian village studies and highlighting inconsistencies in theories of caste and hierarchy. Rather than treating caste as a fixed, static structure, this study argues for an Indian-centric framework that considers the dynamism of rural society. It emphasizes the importance of field-based observations, which reveal that caste and occupational roles are often shaped by economic, regional, and historical factors rather than theoretical hierarchies. By examining these contradictions, this paper calls for a rethinking of village studies, advocating for alternative theoretical frameworks that align with the lived experiences of village communities rather than externally imposed models.

1.1. Methodology And Justification

In order to reevaluate prevailing viewpoints in Indian village studies, this study uses a comparative theoretical critique methodology. It specifically looks at how caste-based and structural-functionalism frameworks can be applied to comprehend village social structures. To assess discrepancies between theoretical presumptions and empirical fieldwork data, the study uses comparative analysis and historical review.

Because of their substantial contributions to Indian village studies and their impact on caste and stratification theories, three eminent academics—M.N. Srinivas, K. Ishwaran, and Kathleen Gough—have been chosen for analysis. Each of these academics helped to shape popular perceptions of rural society by conducting in-depth field-based ethnographic research in various regions of India:

- 1) The dominant caste concept was introduced by M.N. Srinivas of Rampura Village, Karnataka, who also researched the roles of caste, occupation, and hierarchy in South Indian villages.
- 2) K. Ishwaran, from Shivapur Village, Karnataka, studied caste mobility and social stratification while investigating the application of the Varna model to Indian villages.
- 3) Kathleen Gough, from Tanjore Villages in Tamil Nadu, has a unique viewpoint on the relationship between caste and economic systems. She focuses on land relations, social hierarchy, and caste divisions.

These academics' selection enables a geographically and thematically varied analysis that encompasses various Indian regions and interpretations of caste and hierarchy. This study critically assesses the shortcomings of current frameworks and makes the case for the necessity of creating alternative Indian-centric approaches to village studies by contrasting their theoretical assertions with their own field data.

1.2. Structure of the Paper

Three main points are the focus of this paper. It starts by giving a summary of the main theories that are applied in Indian village studies. Second, it highlights contradictions between theoretical perspectives and empirical realities by critically analyzing fieldwork data from important scholars. It concludes by going over the ramifications of these discoveries and looking into different methods for researching Indian villages.

2. Literature Review

From the time of British rule in India to the period when villages began to be studied through classical theoretical approaches, sociology and anthropology have attempted to systematically study villages and present a structured understanding of them. These studies originated during the colonial period when Indian villages were under British administrative control. During this time, British officials took an interest in Indian villages, conducted surveys, and picturized Indian villages.⁵

In contrast, the studies conducted in the mid-20th century differed significantly from earlier colonial accounts. Anthropologists and sociologists developed a systematic approach to studying villages within specific

⁵ For example, Thomas Munro, who served as an officer in the Madras Province, and his contemporaries—Lieutenant Cornel Mark Wilks in the Mysore Province, Elphinstone in the Bombay Presidency, Henry Maine in northern India, and Metcalfe—showed interest in Indian villages during their administration. These officials generally described Indian villages as "little republics" or "petty commonwealths." Their descriptions provided an account of the nature of Indian villages and how they functioned.

theoretical frameworks. These studies analyzed various aspects of rural life, including social relations, family structures, and livelihoods, primarily through the lens of the caste system.

Similarly, these studies were based on specific theoretical backgrounds and methodologies. Early village studies were largely conducted within the framework of structural-functionalism. These studies primarily examined how caste, family, kinship, and economic management functioned in villages.⁶ Studies focusing on caste in villages provide explanations of local customs, beliefs, norms, and traditions.⁷ Likewise, studies centered on the economy analyze aspects such as the agrarian economy, land ownership, and wage labor.⁸ Some village studies primarily discuss village politics, governance, panchayats, and political transitions.⁹ Certain studies explore the historical background of villages, offering insights into how and when villages underwent transformations.¹⁰ Development studies emerged with the objective of improving village infrastructure and services.¹¹ Similarly, gender studies have been conducted with a focus on women in rural areas.¹² Additionally, environmental studies have attempted to analyze the relationship between village communities and their natural surroundings.¹³

The studies on villages have followed a structured and disciplined approach. Anthropologists and sociologists established the method of studying villages within a specific theoretical framework. In 1948, M. N. Srinivas conducted a fieldwork-based study of Rampur, a village near Mysore.¹⁴ Later, in 1953-54, he conducted a restudy to further analyze and explain the social system of Rampura.¹⁵ In this study, caste occupied a central position. Srinivas's research became a model for future scholars in the field of village studies. Scholars who conducted village studies in different parts of India not only referenced Srinivas's work but also followed his approach. That is, the classical approach to village studies, initiated by Srinivas, was later adopted by scholars such as: G. Morris Carstairs (Rajasthan village),¹⁶ Eric J. Miller (North Kerala village),¹⁷ Kathleen Gough (Tanjore village),¹⁸ and others.

These studies attempted to explain the social structure of villages, emphasizing that Indian social structure is deeply intertwined with the caste system. Thus, caste played a crucial role in village studies and was often conceptualized as a system.

3. Theoretical Perspective and the Caste System in Village Studies

The studies conducted as part of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology during the 1950s and 1960s are identified as Village Studies. Scholars in this field studied villages using various theoretical frameworks, such as structural theory, functional theory, and structural-functional theory. When these theoretical frameworks were applied, scholars perceived the village as a structured unit, with caste forming its foundational structure. By considering caste as a system, these studies attempted to explain how different aspects of village life were interconnected and how their functions were interdependent. Specifically, they analyzed how caste was linked to traditional occupations, economic and non-economic relationships, social hierarchy, dominant caste leadership, and family relations (such as patrons and clients).¹⁹ These studies approached the rural community as an organized unit in which caste played a central role. Not only was caste viewed as the core factor of village life, but it was also described as a system that governed various aspects of social and economic interactions. Furthermore, village studies emphasized that caste was not an isolated element but rather an all-encompassing structure that shaped every aspect of rural society.

Scholars argue that the caste system is a hierarchical social structure that was historically used in Indian society to classify people based on occupation and religious practice, etc. The origin of this system is traced to the Chaturvarna model, which divided society into four varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Each

⁶ Srinivas, M. N. (1952). *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford University Press.

⁷ Marriott, McKim. (1955). *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*. University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Thorner, D., & Thorner, A. (1962). *Land and Labour in India*. Asia Publishing House.

⁹ Beteille, A. (1971). *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of hierarchy in a Tanjore Village*. University of California Press.

¹⁰ Kosambi, D. D. (1965). *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*. Routledge.

¹¹ Baviskar, B. S. (1980). *The Politics of Development: The Sugar Cooperatives in Maharashtra*. Oxford University Press.

¹² Dube, L. (1997). *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia*. United Nations University Press.

¹³ Mukerjee, R. (1968). *Man and His Habitation: A Study in Rural Ecology*. Popular Prakashan.

¹⁴ SRINIVAS, M. N. "The Social Structure of a Mysore Village," *The Economic Weekly* 3, no. 42-43 (1951): 1021-1026.

¹⁵ Srinivas, M. N. (1955). *The social system of Mysore village*. In M. Marriott (Ed.), *Village India: Studies in the little community* (2017th ed.). Rawat Publications.

¹⁶ Carstairs, G. M. (1952). A village in Rajasthan. *The Economic Weekly*, 4(3-4), 73-78

¹⁷ Miller, E. (1952). Village structure in North Kerala. *The Economic Weekly*, 4(6), 133-138.

¹⁸ Gough, K. (1952). The social structure of a Tanjore village. *The Economic Weekly*, 4(21), 477-482.

¹⁹ Srinivas, M. N. (1955). *The social system of Mysore village*. In M. Marriott (Ed.), *Village India: Studies in the little community* (2017th ed.). Rawat Publications.

varna had specific roles and responsibilities in serving society. Brahmins were responsible for religious education and worship, Kshatriyas for military and political duties, Vaishyas for trade and commerce, and Shudras for serving the other three varnas.²⁰

In addition to these varna-based divisions, the caste system also included caste-based occupations and strict social norms. A person's caste was determined by birth, which in turn shaped their social status, profession, and even marriage alliances. Many studies on villages have attempted to analyze this caste-based social structure using various theoretical frameworks. By applying these frameworks, scholars have tried to explain how caste functions within village communities and influences different aspects of social and economic life.²¹ Therefore, to understand the functioning of caste in village society, two key aspects of the caste system—caste and traditional occupation, and caste and hierarchy—are examined to assess how they interact and complement each other in shaping village social structures.

4.Examination of the Characteristics of the Caste System

In general, scholars argue that caste is interconnected with various aspects of village life in the study of villages. Among these, they specifically identify the relationship between caste and occupation and the relationship between caste and hierarchy. Thus, how have scholars explained these two aspects—caste and traditional occupation, and caste and hierarchy—in the study of villages? Likewise, how have they interpreted the relationship between them? To what extent is this relationship consistent and justified? These questions are subjected to examination.

4.1.Caste and Traditional Occupation

According to contemporary social science studies, Indian society is structured based on the Varna model, where Brahmins perform religious rituals and education, while Shudras serve the other castes. Over time, these Varnas mixed and evolved into caste groups. In village studies, scholars argue that caste is closely linked to various aspects of village life, particularly occupation. The dominant argument is that each caste is traditionally associated with a specific occupation. Therefore, let us examine how scholars have explained the relationship between caste and occupation in village studies and to what extent their own field data supports this argument. M. N. Srinivas, in his study of Rampur village in the erstwhile Mysore state (present-day Karnataka), describes its social structure in detail. A key point in his observations is that caste is intertwined with all aspects of village life. More specifically, his study highlights the strong connection between caste and occupation. Looking at Rampur's social system, he notes that almost every caste is associated with a specific occupation. As evidence, he presents a detailed list of traditional occupations linked to different castes in the village, reinforcing the argument that "Each caste has a specific traditional occupation,"²²

Caste And Traditional Calling

Name of Caste	Traditional Calling	Population
Okkaliga	Peasant	735
Kuruba	Shepherd	235
Musalman	Artisan and Trader	179
Holeya	Servant	125
Ganiga	Oilman	37
Acari-Kulacari and Matacari	Smith	35
Lingayat	Non- Brahmin Priest	33
Ediga	Toddyman	24
Kumbar	Potter	23
Banajiga	Trader	22
Kelasi	Barber	20
Besta	Fisherman	14
Korama	Swineherd	12
Agasa	Washerman	7
Meda	Basketmaker	7
Brahman- Hoysal Karnataka	Priest and Scholar	6
Brahman- Madhva	Priest and Scholar	6
Brahman- Srivaisnava	Priest and Scholar	3

²⁰ Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. University of Chicago Press, p. 66.

²¹ Sharma, U. (1999). *Caste*. Open University Press, pp. 103-105.

²² "Each caste in Rampura is traditionally associated with the practice of a particular occupation. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp. 1)"

However, he also notes an important variation—"Many castes are engaged in more than one traditional occupation."²³ For instance, in Rampura, the Toddy-tappers (Edigas- traditional alcohol brewers) not only extract toddy but also sell it. The Oilman (Ganigas) not only extract oil but also make and sell fried snacks from oil by-products. They also sell oil lamps at the Madeshwara fair. The Swineherds (Korma caste) follow a dual occupation—while the men raise pigs, the women go around the village practicing fortune-telling. Thus, Srinivas explains that while castes traditionally had designated occupations, many also took up multiple roles for economic survival. Overall, M.N. Srinivas' study reinforces the argument that castes had specific traditional occupations, but with a certain level of occupational flexibility.

Further, according to Srinivas's data, in Rampur village, "all castes up to the untouchables have been following agriculture along with their traditional occupations since the past."²⁴ Although Srinivas states that agriculture is the traditional occupation of the sole proprietors Peasant caste (Okkaligas), he also acknowledges that almost all castes in the village engage in agriculture in one form or another. Similarly, while he identifies trzzade as the traditional occupation of the Traders (Banajigas), contrary evidence from Rampur suggests otherwise. Some Peasants in Rampur state that members of their caste have opened tea shops, rented out bicycles, and run grocery and clothing stores.²⁵ Likewise, when discussing Brahmins, even though he recognizes their traditional occupation as priesthood and their identity as scholars, he describes their actual occupations differently. He notes that "one Brahmin family, which includes the local postmaster, owns farmland and undertakes government contract work on canals."²⁶ Similarly, while he classifies Lingayats as non-Brahmin priests and acknowledges their traditional occupation, he also observes that they engage in agriculture and other economic activities. He mentions that both Brahmins and Lingayats in Rampur "cultivate on temple lands, while other Lingayats in the village are involved in agriculture and trade."²⁷ Discussing the Potters (Kumbar) of Rampur, Srinivas notes that "only one family continues the traditional occupation, consisting of a husband, wife, and a migrant helper. The head of this household owns a small plot of land, which he cultivates personally, and makes pots, pans, and tiles after the agricultural season."²⁸ Although he identifies pottery as the caste's traditional occupation, his observations suggest that there is greater dependence on non-traditional work. Regarding the Shepherds (Kurubaru) of Rampur, he reports that "there is limited grazing land in and around Rampur, which has led local Shepherds to transition to agricultural occupations."²⁹ This indicates that Shepherds have shifted from their traditional work of sheep herding to farming. Similarly, while oil extraction and trading in oil by-products are traditionally associated with the Oilmans (Ganigas), the data from Rampur presents a different picture. He notes that "some Oilman brothers have purchased paddy fields and saved additional money. Other Oilmans in Rampur work as laborers, servants, or small traders."³⁰ The case of the so-called untouchables (Holeyaru) in Rampur further challenges Srinivas's theoretical claims. He states that "out of thirty untouchable families, fifteen are engaged in agriculture while the other fifteen work as wage laborers. Some cultivators serve as hereditary Servants for landowners and village accountants. The men work either as agricultural laborers or household servants."³¹ This contradicts the general assumption that untouchables exclusively serve other castes, as it shows that they not only own agricultural land but also participate in various occupations. Moreover, while Srinivas initially asserts that priesthood is the traditional occupation of Brahmins and Lingayats, he later acknowledges that "priests are found in all castes, not just among Brahmins and Lingayats."³² Thus, while his theoretical framework presents caste as a structural unit in

²³ Again, a caste may have more than one traditional occupation. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp. 3)

²⁴ Furthermore, in addition to their separate traditional occupations, all castes down to the Untouchable have for long commonly practiced agriculture. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp. 3)

²⁵ Some Peasants are engaged in trade: they keep teashops, sell groceries and cloth, and hire out cycles. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp. 4)

²⁶ A second was the old native family of the village postmaster, who owned a little land and did contract work on the canal in summer for the government. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp-5)

²⁷ The priest cultivates the temple's endowed lands. The other Lingdyats in the village are engaged in agriculture and in trade. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, Pp-6)

²⁸ only one of which (composed of a man, his wife, and an immigrant assistant) carries on the traditional occupation. The head of this house owns a little land which he personally cultivates, and during the nonagricultural season he makes pots, pans, and tiles. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, Pp-7)

²⁹ There is very little pasture land in or around Rampura, and this is one of the reasons why local Shepherds have had to change to agricultural occupations. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, Pp- 8-9)

³⁰ Selling torches is apparently a profitable business: the brothers have bought some riceland, and have saved some money in addition. The other Oilmen in Rampura are mere laborers, servants, or petty traders. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, Pp-9)

³¹ Of thirty Untouchable families, fifteen are cultivators, and fifteen live by coolie work. Some of the cultivators are cakaras, or hereditary village servants, whose duty it is to assist the headman and accountant in the collection of land tax. The men of the families which live by coolie work are either agricultural laborers or servants. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, Pp-10)

³² In addition to Brahman and Lingayat priests, there are priests to be found in every other caste. ("VILLAGE INDIA", 2017, pp-5)

the village with specific traditional occupations, the empirical data from his fieldwork contradicts this rigid categorization.

Looking further into caste and traditional occupation, K. Iswaran, in his study of Shivapur village in Dharwad district, Karnataka, also explains these aspects within the framework of caste and traditional occupation. He states, "Since the social structure of Shivapur is built on the basis of the caste system, the social structure of Shivapur can be examined on this basis" (Ishwaran, 1966). Further elaborating, he describes caste as "an institution whose membership is determined by birth, endogamy, occupation, spatial distance, commensality, and drinking restrictions" (Ishwaran, 1966). He continues, "Caste and profession are generally seen as intertwined. Not only is an individual born into a caste, but they are also born for that caste's occupation. Typically, individuals adhere to their caste-based profession, following traditional pathways in choosing their livelihood" (Ishwaran, 1966). Thus, Iswaran's explanations in the study of Shivapur reflect a perspective similar to that of M.N. Srinivas, affirming the relationship between caste and occupation.

However, Iswaran's observations on Brahmin occupations in Shivapur reveal a more complex reality. He states, "The Brahmins of this village are economically very poor. They do not strictly adhere to the rituals and practices prescribed by their caste traditions. For example, to retain their land despite the Land Tenure Act, they began plowing it themselves, in direct violation of their caste norms" (Ishwaran, 1966). Similarly, discussing the occupational shifts among shepherds, he notes, "Although traditionally shepherds were sheep breeders, they are now primarily engaged in agriculture. Among them, there are two distinct groups—cotton bangle wearers and wool bangle wearers." He explains, "These names originate from the fact that the former wear bangles made of cotton thread, while the latter wear bangles made of wool" (Ishwaran, 1966).

Examining Iswaran's explanations, it becomes evident that his argument aligns with the theoretical framework that caste determines specific traditional occupations. However, his fieldwork data contradict this theoretical framework. While he presents employment as a function of caste, the empirical realities he documents suggest otherwise, highlighting inconsistencies between theoretical assumptions and lived experiences.

Similarly, another sociologist, Kathleen Gough, conducted a study on a village in Tanjore. In her research, she describes the social structure of the village. She identifies the population of Tanjore as belonging to three broad groups: Brahmins, non-Brahmins, and Adi Dravidians. Apart from Brahmins, the other two groups encompass several castes. Among the non-Brahmins, the Tamil Vellalars, various Maratha castes, and Tamil Kallans are classified as higher castes. These groups have traditionally controlled land ownership and village administration in Tanjore.

Within the non-Brahmin category, there are also castes considered to be of lower status, including the Konans, Muppannas, Pataiyatchis, and Ahambatiyans. According to Gough, these castes were traditionally engaged as cowherds and agricultural laborers, which she describes as their customary occupation.

The third group consists of the Adi Dravidians, also referred to as the "Original Dravidians." Gough notes that these groups are considered lower castes and are often labeled as "outer castes" by others. This group primarily comprises three castes: the Pallans, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars. Gough explains that the Pallans and Paraiyars were historically serfs under the dominant landlord castes, and even at the time of her study, most of them continued to work as agricultural laborers.

Gough's study highlights that Brahmins in Tanjore traditionally held landownership and administrative power, making these two aspects their customary occupations. Similarly, among the non-Brahmins, the Tamil Vellalars, Maratha castes, and Tamil Kallans were originally warriors who came to Tanjore during various royal wars. Over time, they transitioned from military service to land ownership and governance.

Meanwhile, within the non-Brahmin category, the so-called lower castes—such as the Konans, Muppannas, Pataiyatchis, and Ahambatiyans—were traditionally involved in occupations like cattle herding, tenant farming, and agricultural labor. Gough also mentions that some members of these castes were engaged in royal service. However, at the time of her research, she observed that these groups had largely shifted to agricultural work.

As for the Adi Dravidians, they continued to be regarded as an "outer caste" group. This category primarily included the Pallans, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars, who had historically been bound to the land as serfs under landlord castes. While Gough acknowledges some changes in their conditions over time, her study also presents contradictions. That is, while she describes caste as determining occupation, her field data suggests shifts in occupational roles, indicating changes that challenge the rigid caste-based occupational structure.

When the explanations provided by these three scholars regarding caste and traditional occupations within the caste system are compared with the field data they collected, the explanations appear inconsistent. Several contradictions emerge. While it is argued that each caste has a traditional occupation, the fieldwork data from the village reveals that many individuals engage in non-traditional occupations. This raises the question: On what basis can one argue that castes have traditional occupations?

4.2.Caste and Hierarchy

As noted earlier, village studies, which are a part of contemporary social sciences, focus primarily on the caste system. These studies argue that Indian society is structured around the varna model, where Brahmins perform worship and educational duties, while Shudras serve the other castes. They further claim that this varna model functioned as a hierarchical system. Over time, it is argued, these varnas evolved into castes.

Another key aspect observed in these studies is the argument that hierarchy exists within castes as well. That is, just as each caste is associated with a specific traditional occupation, a hierarchical ranking is also present among castes. This raises the question: How is hierarchy understood in village studies? A widely accepted view is that hierarchy is a fundamental characteristic of the caste system. A common argument is that hierarchy is maintained through the prohibition of inter-caste marriages and the determination of a person's social position based on birth. Additionally, it is argued that food habits also play a role in establishing caste rank. Given this context, this section examines how scholars perceive caste and hierarchy in village studies. Specifically, it explores how scholars have interpreted field data related to caste hierarchy.

Srinivas' Study on Caste Hierarchy in Rampur Village

Srinivas, who studied the social structure of Rampur village, attempts to explain caste hierarchy in the village. According to him, several castes exist in Rampur, and there are inequalities between them. He argues that caste groups are separated through endogamy and commensality and that hierarchy is reinforced through food habits and occupations. He further states that food practices and occupations are closely linked to caste hierarchy and that some castes accept cooked food only from members of their own caste (Srinivas, 1952, p. 20). Based on this understanding, Srinivas provides a ranked list of castes in Rampur village.

Caste Hierarchy of Rampur village

Rank Group	Caste		
I	Brahman (A) Hoysola Karnataka (B) Madhva	Lingayat	Smith
II	(A) Peasant—Shepherd—Trader—Oilman—Potter—Fisherman— Washerman- Barber—Basketmaker— Toddyman (B) Swineherd		
III	Untouchable		

However, when we examine Srinivas' data, several contradictions emerge. For instance, the Traders caste of Rampur, which is identified as vegetarian, is found to consume meat (Srinivas, 1952). Similarly, the Smiths, who are considered to hold an equal status to Brahmins, claim that they accept cooked food only from Brahmins. However, while male Smiths accept food cooked by Lingayats, female Smiths do not. On the other hand, most, if not all, Hindu castes claim that the Smiths are lower in status than them. Moreover, other castes do not accept food or drinking water from the Smiths. Even the untouchables, who occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy, refuse to accept food and water from the Smiths (Srinivas, 1952).

These observations reveal a contradiction: while one part of the study asserts the presence of a strict caste hierarchy, the field data seem to challenge the coherence of such a rigid structure.

Logical Analysis of Hierarchy in Rampur Village

If we analyze the case of Rampur village logically, identifying caste positions within a fixed hierarchical framework becomes difficult. The criteria used to determine caste hierarchy do not consistently apply to the realities observed in the village. For example, if food habits were the primary determinant of caste status, then the fact that Smiths accept food from Brahmins would suggest their higher status. However, in the same village, other castes do not perceive Smiths as a higher caste. Additionally, Smith women do not accept food from Brahmin households.

Similarly, although Traders are categorized as vegetarians, Srinivas' data indicate that at least one family in the village consumes meat. If we attempt to determine caste ranking based on food habits, it remains unclear whether Smiths receive food from Brahmins or whether Brahmins accept food from Smiths.

Overall, Srinivas' data on Rampur village suggest that using food habits as a basis for determining caste hierarchy is problematic and inconsistent.

Ishwaran' Study on Caste Hierarchy in Shivapur Village

Similarly, another scholar, K. Ishwaran, in his study of the village of Shivapur, discusses caste hierarchy. He argues that while studying the caste system, it is useful to keep in mind the general Varna model—comprising Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and the "untouchables"—as a framework (Ishwaran, 1966). He further states that although the specific characteristics of a pure Varna system may not be universally present, its underlying principles remain applicable. According to him, all social practices in Shivapur operate based on the Varna system (Ishwaran, 1966). In this way, Ishwaran presents a criterion for identifying caste hierarchy (Ishwaran, 1966).

Caste Hierarchy of Shivapur village

Grouping	Caste
I	1. Lingayat
	2. Brahman 3. Jain 4. Vaishya 5. Panchal
II	6. Maratha 7. Rajaput
III	8. Kurub
IV	9. Muslim
V	10. Barikar 11. Talawar 12. Korava
VI	13. Holey

However, according to Ishwaran's own data, while Brahmins traditionally occupy the highest rank in the Varna model, this was not the case in Shivapur. He notes that, contrary to expectations, Brahmins did not hold the top position in the local hierarchy. Instead, he observes that Lingayats had assumed the dominant social position, as reflected in both public perception and the behavior of Lingayats themselves (Ishwaran, 1966)). Based on his field data, Ishwaran provides a list detailing caste-based hierarchy in Shivapur.

Logical Analysis of Hierarchy in Shivapur Village

A logical examination of Ishwaran's hierarchy list reveals a contradiction between his theoretical argument and his empirical findings. According to the Varna model's framework, Brahmins should have held the highest status. However, in Shivapur, they occupy the second position, while Lingayats hold the first. This discrepancy highlights a clear contradiction between Ishwaran's theoretical framework and the realities observed through his fieldwork.

In summary, the caste hierarchy studies of Rampura and Shivapur were critically examined. When comparing theoretical explanations of caste hierarchy with empirical data collected through fieldwork, inconsistencies and contradictions emerge. While scholars argue that caste hierarchy follows the Varna model, the data from Srinivas's Rampura and Ishwaran's Shivapur do not clearly support this claim. In both cases, the precise ranking of castes does not align with the expected Varna-based hierarchy.

Conclusion

Between 1950 and 1970, several scholars in the field of social sciences conducted fieldwork-based studies on Indian villages. A close examination of these studies reveals several noteworthy aspects. Scholars have interpreted the internal organization of villages in different ways. However, it becomes evident that nearly all scholars have viewed the Indian social structure primarily through the lens of the caste system.

This article specifically examines two aspects of the caste system. When evaluating the extent to which scholars' arguments complement each other, contradictions become apparent. For instance, while scholars argue that each caste traditionally follows a specific occupation within the caste system, the empirical data they collected through fieldwork often contradicts this claim. Similarly, their explanations of caste and stratification raise further contradictions—while they outline specific criteria for determining stratification, the fieldwork data does not align with these theoretical assertions.

Therefore, this study highlights the need for a reassessment of village studies and the existing explanations of caste, urging a more critical re-examination of these scholarly interpretations.

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