

THE JUNGLE AND THE VILLAGE: DISCOURSES ON CRIME AND DEVIANCET IN RURAL NORTH INDIA

Julia Wardhaugh

Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Wales

Abstract

Within both Indian and Western discourses, the jungle is a space to be feared. The village is alternately idealised and patronised, but generally deemed to be more orderly than the jungle, if less 'civilised' than the city. This paper explores discourses on both jungle and village in North India and concludes with an exploration of competing perspectives on social order in one particular Indian village.

Keywords

Crime and deviance; discourses on space; rural North India

Indian Discourses on the Jungle

The Indian fear of the jungle predates the British colonial period. For them, the *jangal* is a place where ghosts, spirits and witches have traditionally been thought to live; 'they reside in forests and "enchanted groves"'(Kakar, 1982: 4-5). The *jangal* is also the place to which deviant and marginal groups traditionally have been banished. According to Bailey (1997: 126) in his anthropological study of Bisipara village in Orissa:

... forest and village stand at the two ends, representing the extremes. At one end is order and civilization, things under control, certainty: but the forest is the place of uncontrolled and uncontrollable forces, the negation of the idea of the ordered community. Consequently, what is a threat to the community is suitably expelled to the forest.

Other groups may choose exile in the forest. The *sadhus* or wandering holy men are one such marginal group who live both physically and metaphorically in the jungle or at least at its fringes. According to traditional Hindu *dharma* texts, in this case *Vasishtha Dharmasūtra* 10, 12-15 (Olivelle, 2000: 387), the wandering ascetic should avoid all contact with village life:

Let him not keep a fixed residence, staying in the outskirts of a village, in a temple or an abandoned house, or at

the foot of a tree, and applying his mind to the cultivation of knowledge. Living always in the wilderness, let him never walk within sight of village animals.

In Hindu society, living in caves or in forests has long been seen as the ideal way of fulfilling monastic and ascetic ideals. However, there is an ambiguity at the heart of this cultural ideal. *Sadhus* are revered among Hindus, but they are also feared as dangerous and marginal beings. They are often used as bogeyman figures with which to frighten children, such as: 'Be careful or the *sadhus* will steal you away!' During colonial times, *ayahs* passed on stories of the dangers of the jungle to the British children in their charge: 'The other story was about an old man of the wood, black and hairy, who used to come from the jungle into small children's bedrooms and tickle them to death'(Allen, 2000: 23). Many Shaivite *sadhus* are recognisable in this description of Shiva by Hartsuiker (1993: 13):

[H]e runs around naked in the jungle; keeps the company of wild beasts, goblins and ghosts; covers his body with ashes from the cremation grounds; uses a skull as a drinking cup; is continually intoxicated by the use of hashish; and acts like a madman, laughing wildly. In short, he is an ascetic, and what is more, an outsider.

While groups such as the *sadhus* may choose a marginal existence in the forest, the *jangal* is also used as a place of punishment and exile for other deviant groups. Indeed, the word *van-vāsī* or forest-dweller is also used to describe the condition of exile. Those committing serious crimes, for example the murder of a Brahmin, were required under ancient law to undergo penances. These included, according to *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.3 (Olivelle, 2000: 241) to 'reside in the wilderness', but also 'begging almsfood from seven houses while proclaiming his crime' (*id.*).

Under ancient Indian law, the monarch had a duty to protect the citizenry, to attempt to deliver safety for them. The Āpastamba Dharmasūtra (Dhillon, 1998: 31) suggests that '[t]he king should see that there is no danger from thieves in villages and forests'. It was the case that 'in Hinduism the king stands for and is the guardian of dharma. In that respect he embodies the Divinity' (Bailey, 1997: 141). However, aside from this general overseer function, villages were largely left to be self-regulatory entities.

In Mughal North India the cities were subject to centralised policing and military forms of regulation, while rural areas were left largely to govern themselves, not because they were assumed to be peaceful places, but because officials both feared and despised village life.¹ In the absence of central intervention, 'the rural areas were...held in bondage by Darogahs and hereditary village officials. Cases of Darogahs colluding with thieves, dacoits and bands of marauders were not uncommon' (Dhillon, 1998: 32). Beginning with the Mughal period, continuing with the British Raj and concluding with post-independence rule, elite groups have feared and despised both the jungle and the village. Many of the 'brown sahibs' who have inherited the power to rule have internalised colonial discourses on both village and jungle.

There is a clear city-village-jungle hierarchy, with position in this hierarchy being clearly associated with degree of regulation. Urban spaces are understood to be the most regulated and therefore the more desirable places to inhabit, while the jungle is the least regulated space and hence the one most feared. The village acts as a buffer zone between regulated and unregulated space, between city and jungle (Short, 1991). Economically important as a source of revenue, villages have nevertheless long been disregarded in both social and political terms. Not deemed threatening by a succession of political masters, Indian villages have generally been left to regulate themselves (Inden, 1990).

Orientalist Discourses on the Jungle

For the European Orientalist, Asia in general and India in particular was understood to occupy a different time and space and was indisputably 'other'. Within

this discourse, the essence of India was expressed through its main religion, Hinduism, and everything was explicable within this frame of reference. The jungle was often used as a metaphor for Hinduism, as in this extract from Sir Charles Eliot (1862-1931), cited by Inden (1990: 86):

As in the jungle every particle of soil seems to put forth its spirit in vegetable life...so in India art, commerce, warfare and crime...seek for a manifestation in religion, and since men and women of all classes and occupations, all stages of education and civilization, have contributed to Hinduism, much of it seems low, foolish and even immoral. The jungle is not a park or garden. Whatever can grow in it, does grow. The Brahmins are not gardeners but forest officers.

Just as the Brahmins have for millennia regulated their co-religionists, so during colonial times many Orientalists and Indologists assumed a role as the 'jungle officer of the Indian mind' (Inden, 1990: 87). The jungle became a central colonial discourse, and was used widely as a metaphor for India and Hinduism, as well as for the ways in which this country and this religion departed from Western norms. In short, India was viewed as a jungle, with all the romance and intrigue as well as the dangers that the jungle represents to the Western mind. John Stout's *Empire's Eve* is cited in Shah (1988: 8):

Foster's sweat-bathed face was agonised. "It's those damned drums, Carruthers", he panted weakly. He slumped back on the makeshift brushwood bed. "Steady on, old chap". The Commissioner suppressed a shudder as the compelling, primitive rhythm thudded in his brain. "You know our mission. Headquarters sent us to help these people, no matter what it costs". He put the water-bottle to the trembling man's lips. "Drink this, old fellow. Remember, the natives think that they own this jungle - them and the spirits". The drums continued their hellish pounding. The natives were restless all right. What would tomorrow bring?

The main theme of this extract is the colonial struggle to impose order on 'native' peoples and places. The 'natives' are identified with the threatening physicality of the place, the overwhelming forces of nature that caused the settlers to have 'sweat-bathed' faces and 'trembling lips'. Indigenous people had the temerity to believe that they 'owned' the jungle, ('them and the spirits'), and thus - perhaps inevitably - they became associated with the perceived dangerousness of the jungle.

For the British in India the jungle became emblematic of the country itself, and a metaphor for exoticism, romance, adventure and danger. The 'natives' were associated with primal, untamed nature, while the British cast themselves as the bringers of culture and the takers of nature. The jungle, then, can be taken as a metaphor for deviance and disorder.

What is often overlooked is that both British and Indian discourses construct the jungle as a place of danger. In India, as already noted, the jungle as a physical space is seen as the natural habitat of many deviant and marginal groups, as well as the place of residence of potentially malignant supernatural forces. In a metaphorical sense, it is also a space that is deeply feared within Indian culture.

The ownership of such a place by indigenous people could be contested once it was established within the colonial mind that they were unworthy of this claim. Their construction as 'primitive' and 'native' people helped to justify the colonial exploits, first of the East India Company and later the British Crown, under the guise of an altruistic mission to civilise and to establish law and order. The colonial project was thus supported by Orientalist discourses on the nature of subject peoples. Said (1993: 178) described '[t]he world of imperialist polemic, in which the native is naturally a delinquent, the white a stern but moral judge and parent'. Simultaneously passive and delinquent, unable to regulate their own disorderly lives, the 'natives' required the intervention of those who were able to govern.

The British in India believed themselves to be the only ones capable of accepting the 'white man's burden' of governing 'native' peoples (Kipling, 1889). In *The Second Jungle Book* Kipling (1895: 211) refers

explicitly to the colonial responsibility for maintaining order against the threat represented by the jungle: 'When the jungle moves only white men can hope to turn it aside'. This regulatory role extended to village as well as to jungle. Kipling (1895: 211) recounted that villagers living close to the jungle understood that the 'English ... were a perfectly mad people, who would not let honest farmers kill witches in peace' and 'it is said that they govern all the land, and do not suffer people to burn or beat each other without witnesses' (Kipling, 1895: 199).

The British in India thus cast themselves as 'Lords of the Jungle'. Kipling, consummate chronicler of Empire, captured the dilemma of Indologists as the 'jungle officer of the Indian mind' (Inden, 1990: 87). Their task was to know and therefore be able to control Jungle India, without becoming part of it, without 'going native'. Mowgli's song in the famous *Jungle Book* (Kipling, 1894: 74) captures the dilemma of the one who, in trying to be of two places, belongs to neither:

Wolf pack, ye have cast me out too.
The jungle is shut to me and the village
gates are shut. Why?

As Mang flies between the beasts and
the birds so fly I between
The village and the jungle. Why?

Seeking the best aspects of two worlds, the British in India desired the rewards of 'forbidden India' while maintaining their dominion over the land and its peoples. In the *Jungle Book*, 'Mowgli the "Frog", amphibious child of the jungle and city, of humans and animals, can live precariously as Lord of the Jungle and be not of the Jungle' (Sullivan, 1993: 24).

In this way, the jungle could be brought under control by the British and their jungle officers, including indigenous regulators such as the Brahmins. Indeed, to sensitive observers such as Kipling, it was evident that systems of law and order already existed, waiting to be harnessed by the British Empire. The task for the servants of Empire was to understand the ways of the jungle in order, not to suppress them, but to direct them to better and more efficient ends. However, there would always remain those who stood

outside the 'law of the jungle'. In Kipling's tale, Baloo tells Mowgli (Kipling, 1894: 35):

I have taught thee all the Law of the Jungle for all the peoples of the jungle – except the Monkey-Folk who live in the trees. They have no Law. They are outcaste...Their way is not our way...They are very many evil, dirty, shameless...The Monkey-People are forbidden...to the Jungle-People.

The criminals and deviants who refuse to conform to the rule of law must be subjected to regulation, no-one may be allowed to stand outside of the system: 'The Bander-Log (the Monkey-People in the *Jungle Books*)...must learn to respect and adopt the rule of power, law and government represented by neo-imperialism's consistently insidious forms of surveillance and control' (Sullivan, 1993: 180).

The apparent contradiction of the constructs 'passive' and 'delinquent' served as justification for the imposition of colonial rule. If the 'natives' could be understood as engaging in a rather undirected yet persistent delinquency, and at the same time judged incapable of regulating themselves, then the scene was set for the establishment of 'British' systems of criminal justice. This is exactly what did happen, with the introduction into India of legal, police and prison systems modelled on those of Britain. These systems have survived more than fifty years of independent rule. In establishing British forms of regulation, successive governors, administrators and legal reformers sought to eradicate a series of deviant 'native' practices such as *thagai*, *sati* and child marriages. *Thagai* (also known as *thuggee*) was suppressed by Sir William Sleeman, an Indian official and major-general during the period 1835-41 (Taylor, 1986). *Sati* was banned by the British from 1829 onwards, and a further law was passed in 1987 making the glorification of *sati* a criminal offence (Dalrymple, 1998). Child marriages were made illegal under the 1929 Sharda Act.ⁱⁱ For the Orientalist, such practices served only to confirm the aberrant nature of Eastern peoples, deriving from their supposed 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness'.

British colonial discourses of India-as-jungle emerged in order to sustain the colonial adventure, an adventure that was only possible if based on the premise of 'otherness' among subject lands and peoples. Following the defeat of the Scottish Highlanders at the battle of Culloden in 1746, any true wilderness in Britain could be said to have disappeared. Thereafter, the concept of 'wilderness' tended to be transferred abroad, particularly to the colonies. Such territories became the dark and unexplored continents, and 'the concept of wilderness...sustained and legitimated the colonial adventure which incorporated much of the world's territory into the British sphere of commercial influence and political power' (Short, 1991: 58).

While romantic notions of the wilderness have often alternated with classical fears of the jungle, throughout most of human history fear of wild places has predominated. Short (1991) argues that there are three main elements in the fear of this wilderness. Wilderness itself is feared as a place beyond human control, and there is also a fear of those living in the wilderness, people who exist beyond the known social order. Finally, there is a fear of the influence that may be exerted by people of the wilderness on those living 'inside' civilisation, a fear of pollution, contamination or corruption.

Within colonial discourse, peoples of the jungle were more to be feared than village people, although the latter were still not deemed to match Western standards of civilisation. However, they were thought to be more acceptable and more malleable, and village India provided a valuable buffer zone between the unregulated jungle with its 'tribal' populations and the regulated spaces of Indian urban and Western cultures.

Discourses on Village India

Between the village and the fields a break marks civilization's first boundary. Conduct noticeably reprehensible in the village is ignored in the fields. Out there people are not so markedly on stage and they relax some restrictions that respectability requires in the village. Concerns with caste purity are less to the front. Standards of modesty are lowered... (Bailey, 1997: 126).

Gandhi, the 'father of the nation', used to say that 'India lives in her...villages....That is the real India, my India for which I live....Rural India has been and must continue to be the heart of India' (Singh, 2001: 6). Ever since then, at least a token support for the idea of village India has been mandatory for nationalist politicians wearing *khadi*. Theirs is a self-conscious resistance to the urban-centred modernity of the Western world, although they of course inhabit similar social and political spaces in the elite enclaves of cities such as New Delhi or Bombay. The lauding of villages as the 'real India' is also in part a resistance to centuries of British rule, when village India was constructed as a 'backward' and 'primitive' place (Saha, 1994).

This idealisation of village India is a recent anomaly within Indian culture. A predominantly rural nation has little need of a rural idyll: This is largely the preserve of developed and urbanised Western nations on the brink of losing their countryside as functioning social and economic spaces (Cloke and Little, 1997; Bunce, 1994; Philo, 1992). An older and more prevalent theme has been the distaste within Indian urban culture for everything that is represented by rurality, from peasant economic culture to traditional inter-caste relations. City-dwellers have feared and despised villages, just as villagers have feared the jungle. The Mughal Empire, for example, was city-based, and officials rarely ventured into the villages, leaving them for the most part as self-regulating entities. For many people today, the cities represent an escape from the economic hardships and strict social controls of village culture – maybe the phrase 'urban jungle' conveys more than just heavily congested living environments.

For traditional Indologists India was no more and no less than its villages. Charles Metcalfe was the first to refer, in 1810, to India as a 'village republic' (Inden, 1990). Within Western discourse, from Marx to Hegel and Baden-Powell, India has been seen as quintessentially rural, with the village as its most basic social unit. Moreover, each village was understood as being self-sufficient, with little relationship either to other villages or to the wider body politic. Orientalists viewed village India as a static and unchanging relic from early

ancient modes of society. Indian villages were understood as the natural and simple antithesis of complex, modern urban society. Some Western discourse is still based on the assumption of the superiority of Western culture, in opposition to the presumed persistence of feudalism within Indian rural culture.

India, then, was constructed as rural, predominantly Hindu, caste-ridden and under-developed. The British Empire, as we have seen, was founded on a presumption of superiority and on the assumption of the duty to govern (naïve yet delinquent) native peoples. However, Indian villages were the relatively non-threatening other of the British Empire. It was assumed that Indian villages could easily be contained and controlled by the dynamic modernity of the West:

This village India was not an Other that in any way threatened the European Self....The modern in the form of the British Indian state had the power to know and to govern not only itself but also the Indian villagers, embodiments of the ancient incapable of any action on their own even in their own time, never mind in the 'present'...(Inden, 1990: 148).

Like the Mughals before them, the British established their centres of power in the cities, ruling the villages from a distance (Sangar, 1998). In order to do so, both empires relied on an assumption that village India could largely be trusted to be self-governing. Village institutions such as the *panchayat* (headed by a *pradhan*), the *chowkidar*, and above all the caste system, although despised as examples of village backwardness, were nevertheless understood as forming the basis of a system of regulation that contributed to the maintenance of order in the countryside.

Although there are of course significant differences between the two, Orientalist and nationalist discourses have some features in common. Both assume a superiority for their own value-systems, in opposition to that of village India, despite (or perhaps partly because of) a tendency within the latter discourse towards idealisation of rural society. Neither leaves any space for village discourses, nor for any sense of agency among villagers. Both discourses put forward a 'dichotomy

between state and village-cum-caste' (Inden, 1990: 159).

For many Indologists, village India was inferior to the Western state, but was also viewed as an incorrupt social system based on communal values, in opposition to the competitiveness inherent in modernity. For nationalists, in a similar vein, villagers were to be praised for their simple and co-operative approach to life, in comparison with the deviousness and exploitation supposed to be characteristic of urban life.

Some recent Western scholarship has rejected the essentialism of earlier work, instead making space for village discourses and recognising human agency in constructing social reality. Social anthropologists, among others, have conducted research in Indian villages in an attempt both to examine the impact of official discourses on village life, and the ways in which villagers construct their own social worlds (Bailey, 1997; Fuller, 1992; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996; Wadley, 1994).

Brass (1997) for example, in his study of the pseudonymous village of Pachpera in the Aligarh district of western Uttar Pradesh, examined competing discourses surrounding questions of rural law and order. Inspired by Foucault's approach in his work *I, Pierre Rivière*, he decided to offer competing accounts of the events surrounding the 'theft of an idol' in the North Indian countryside. He identified two major discourses on crime and conflict, the first of which he describes as a 'law and order' discourse, typically held by rural power-holders. Within this perspective, the rules of the system of criminal justice are clear to all, and observed and maintained most of the time. Cases of criminality and disorder can be explained as individual aberrations, or else attributed to deviant groups such as criminal castes. Any illegal or wrongful behaviour on the part of the police or other authorities can be explained by the 'one bad apple' thesis, and does not serve to undermine the legitimacy of the criminal justice system as a whole.

Contrasted with the 'law and order' discourse is the opposite view that 'there is no law and order in the countryside'. This is most likely to be held by ordinary, that is to say relatively powerless,

villagers. Within this perspective, the police are viewed as corrupt and prone to commit assaults and other crimes against suspects and victims alike: few villagers would willingly involve themselves in the police process (Dhillon, 1998).

Similarly, lawyers and judges are commonly deemed to be amenable to bribery, and justice means little as an abstract concept: rather, it is a commodity for sale. Rural India is often described as litigious, with the law acting as an instrument in the hands of the powerful to pursue their own interests. For example, Bailey (1997: 147) notes that among often illiterate villagers, 'documents are a symbol of power'. Successive empires and contemporary rural elites have exploited this power. Thus, the powerful may be as criminal as those who are processed by the criminal justice system, and ordinary villagers are frequently the victims of the corrupt local elite.

Rather than deciding which may be said to be the discourse most representative of 'reality', Brass (1997: 80) suggests looking beyond this dichotomy, towards understanding that:

...power relations in the countryside include the police, criminals, politicians, and the use of force and violence as everyday instruments of persuasion and compulsion. In this context, the concepts of law and order and criminality are smokescreens, word-weapons of attack and defense in the game of explaining or justifying incidents of violence.

Paradoxically, this is a system based not on anarchy, but on a set of checks and controls, albeit within what Brass describes as a Hobbesian world, wherein each person struggles to achieve their own interests at the expense of the less powerful. The system may be exploitative and corrupt, but everyone knows the rules and their place within the system. Both law-makers and law-breakers know, and play by, the rules of the game.

Regulating the Village: Systems of Control

This paper has been concerned with Indian and Western discourses on village and jungle, and one core theme has been

that of the *jangal* as a metaphor for crime and deviance. The city has been constructed as an ordered space, with village India as an intermediary space between city and jungle. What I would like to do now is to offer different interpretations of crime and justice in Nagaria, one village in North India.ⁱⁱⁱ During two periods of fieldwork in this village, significantly different perspectives began to emerge on the social order of the village.^{iv} While there were many shades of interpretation, these may crudely be characterised as 'consensus' and 'conflict' perspectives. In addition to these local perspectives was a third – Orientalist – construction that echoed in the background, a legacy of centuries of colonial rule that is still present in contemporary village India.

Orientalist Discourse

The village *chowkidar* represents a premodern system of social control: this is quaint but ineffective, and local people are stubborn in resisting the use of modern institutions such as the police. Similarly, rather than have recourse to the legal system, villagers allow cases to be tried and punished by the person known locally as the 'baby rajah'. This demonstrates local people's stubborn attachment to feudal relations, for reasons of tradition and sentiment. In both cases, despite British attempts to modernise, the 'natives' prove themselves to be resistant to change.

Consensus Model

Village life is regulated primarily in terms of informal mechanisms of social control. These include family structures with hierarchies based on age and gender, the caste system, religious practices and duties, and the general level of surveillance that obtains in any small community. In terms of the resolution of conflict, there is an established Indian system based on the *panchayat* (village council) at whose head is the *pradhan*. Most cases of conflict in the village can be resolved by recourse to the *panchayat*, and informal negotiations will take place. The police will only be called in as a last resort, and then only after discussion with the *pradhan*.

Villagers historically have tended to regulate their own affairs; in a small community informal systems are more

effective. The formal systems of law and policing introduced by the British are alien to Indian culture and largely irrelevant to the needs of the village. The 'baby rajah' and the *chowkidar* are examples of informal and locally-relevant systems of control. The 'king' is the traditional guardian of *dharma*, and must be respected as such. Even though his formal authority has been usurped by the modern republican political system, he is still an important figure within village Hinduism.

Conflict Model

Less powerful groups are not fairly represented on the *panchayat*, and the *pradhan* in Nagaria also happens to be a major landowner, factory owner, and member of the dominant caste. Villagers are reluctant to call the police when they are victims of crime because the police are corrupt, and would require a bribe before they would pursue a case - they may even harass or arrest the complainant. Powerful families can commit crimes with impunity, and then bribe the police in order to avoid charges.

In addition to the corruption of the official agents of social control, there exists what might be described as a private system of criminal justice. Despite over fifty years as a secular democracy, feudal systems still persist in India, with in this instance the power base of the local king remaining intact. The 'baby rajah' has 'traditional' (although illegal) authority over 500 villages in the area, and carries out beatings and other forms of punishment against any workers or tenants who offend him. It is also alleged that there is a 'hit man' who will murder anyone who opposes him. In the past, at least one village leader has received death threats because of his anti-corruption stance and challenge to locally powerful groups.

The *chowkidar* may seem to be 'low-tech' and ineffective in Western terms, but when necessary he is armed to protect local development workers from violent assaults, harassment and death threats. In short, the powerful regulate the powerless by means of private and illegal systems based on fear, and the official system of justice is both corrupt and ineffective.

Conclusion

The conflict model would seem, at least on the surface, to lend support to the

Orientalist position that Indians are incapable of administering coherent systems of criminal justice, but instead have lapsed back into feudalism after the end of British rule. My conclusions would be rather different. First, that the existence of corrupt official systems and unauthorised unofficial systems of criminal justice need not support the Orientalist position. Arguably, these systems are the product both of the colonial history of the Indian subcontinent, and of the poverty and inequalities still endemic in post-colonial India. Second, that the two models of village order described need not be mutually exclusive: it may well be true that both (consensus and conflict) systems of control operate alongside one another.

A final and more general conclusion is that social order within village India should be understood within a wider context. Leaving aside the distracting influence of romantic or demonic myths of rurality, ethnographic and other accounts of village life such as the one briefly presented here should be read with an awareness of wider political, social and economic influences. The agency of individuals should also be recognised. Contrary to Indological orthodoxy, rural India is not composed of a series of static, ancient and self-contained 'village republics'. Rather, 'the acts of the villagers, performed in tandem with other agents, are the events that actually shape and reshape villages' (Inden, 1990: 160).

Notes

ⁱ For an idyllic view of Indian villages, see Saha (1994).

ⁱⁱ However, until today the *Child Marriage Restraint Act* of 1929 and its various amendments have not succeeded in outlawing the practice. For a recent critique from the angle of international human rights, see Sagade (2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a pseudonym for a village in Moradabad district in western Uttar Pradesh. This district is located in the western Upper Doab region of the Hindi heartland of North India. Research on which this case-study is based was conducted by the author in 1999 and 2002. Grateful thanks are extended to residents of this village.

^{iv} Various accounts were obtained by means of participant observation in the village, along with interviews with a wide range of villagers.

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