Description of the Module

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Description of the Module</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject Name</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Name</td>
<td>Agrarian Relations and Social Structure in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Name/Title</td>
<td>External Influences: Robert Redfield and the Concept of Peasant society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objectives

This module looks at the origins of peasant studies in India. It outlines the major intellectual influences that shaped the early discussions around the notions of peasantry, peasant society and peasant culture.

Key words

Peasantry, Peasant Culture, Peasant society, Robert Redfield, India

Module Structure

**External Influences: Robert Redfield and the Concept of Peasant society**

Introduction, Discovery of peasant society as a subject of study, Emergence of Peasant as an analytical category, Robert Redfield: Conceptualisation and Reconceptualization of Peasantry, Redfield tradition and discourse on Peasantry in India, Conclusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Prof. Sujata Patel</td>
<td>Dept. of Sociology, University of Hyderabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Coordinator</td>
<td>Dr. Manish Thakur</td>
<td>IIM, Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Writer</td>
<td>Professor B. B. Mohanty</td>
<td>Dept. of Sociology, Pondicherry University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Reviewer</td>
<td>Manish Thakur</td>
<td>IIM, Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Editor</td>
<td>Manish Thakur</td>
<td>IIM, Calcutta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. 2

Introduction

Peasant society or peasantry is a contentious concept in social sciences particularly in the context of societies like India. Even the social anthropologists and sociologists in India for whom the study of peasant society is of major interest, are not in agreement about the meaning attached to the concept of peasant society. Although the Indian society traditionally was characterised as a peasant society, the concept of peasant society acquired scholarly attention only in the mid-twentieth century following the discovery of peasantry by the American and Western anthropologists in response to the rising anthropological interest in the comparative study of the human conditions. Robert Redfield’s studies in Mexico and his conceptualisation of peasant society, in fact, provided a model to many of his western followers and Indian scholars to view the Indian situation in a new light. Understanding of the intellectual heritage behind Redfield’s conceptualisation of peasant society, and the discourse that followed it, is essential to have better clarity over terms such as peasant, peasantry and peasant society.

Discovery of peasant society as a subject of study

Though the study of agriculture and farming population goes back to the classic doctrines of political economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, peasant society as a field of study in anthropology and sociology emerged only at the turn of the twentieth century. Traditionally sociologists and anthropologists were studying complex industrial societies on the one end and the primitive society on the other. The classical theorists like Marx, Weber and Durkheim sought to understand the rise of modern economic behaviour by comparing pre-industrial with industrial societies. In this classical tradition, a variety of binary concepts and theories were created to explain the modern and traditional, industrial and pre-industrial societies; the peasant society or agricultural society did not find a place within the available conceptual framework and almost all the nineteenth-century sociologists worked predominantly on industrial society, and the peasant society was considered as residual to industrial society\(^1\).

\(^1\)For example, Marx’s analysis led him to believe that the peasantry could not survive in the long term and would tend to disappear, with most of them being displaced from land and joining the proletariat.
Peasant society emerged as an area of study mainly after the World War II as a result of growing awareness of the importance of the Third World countries which were overwhelmingly peasant, and the increasing participation of the peasantry in these countries in the political processes. This growth of interest in peasant societies was due partly to certain developments in the field of anthropology, and partly to the concerted focus of the United Nations-sponsored "development programs" on peasantry. Western anthropologists have been running short of 'unspoiled' tribes and the closed 'folk' communities. However, in the past, long before anthropologists, the historians, economists, political theorists and statisticians had carried out studies but with perspectives specific to their own disciplines. The origin of the study of peasants and peasant societies dates back to the indigenous attempts made at the turn of the twentieth century in the Eastern and Central Europe with growing recognition of the problems afflicting the people living in the countryside. This is because of the fact that these nations were then faced with numerous problems given the presence of a large peasantry – the poorest, most backward and numerically a large population on its way to modernization. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, European research into peasantry had, however, encountered adverse conditions. The political developments such as the emergence of national ideologies of various kinds, military dictatorship and Russian collectivization etc. during this period had not favoured specific studies on peasant communities. Nevertheless, such studies were not altogether absent, few studies were undertaken. However, most of these studies were not available to the English-speaking worlds as they were written only in East European languages barring such titles as W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki's early *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918) and Doreen Warriner's *The Economics of Peasant Farming* (1939) which were published in English. Though these scholarly traditions produced a wealth of theory and data, the extent to which they dealt with peasants as such is debatable; the point of reference of such traditions was specific to the politically

---

2 Studies made especially by V. I. Lenin and Karl Kautsky attached greater significance to peasantry. Lenin emphasised the problem of ‘middle peasants’ as a problem in the context of post-revolutionary developments.

3 For example, Chayanov, who challenged the Marxist line of analysis, in his *Peasant Farm Organisation* and *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives* published in 1925 and 1927 respectively, wrote on peasantry and advanced a theory of 'peasant economy'. Besides, there were other studies like Doreen Warriner's *The Economics of Peasant Farming*, 1939; Conrad M Arensberg’s *The Irish Countrymen*, 1937; David Mitryan’s *The Land and Peasant in Rumania*, 1930; W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918); and Raymond Firth’s *Malay Fisherman*, 1946.
problematic peasantry of particular European countries. However, the studies that were undertaken at the subsequent period with different theoretical persuasions gave rise to the anthropology of peasantry as a discipline imparting to it scientific vigour and precision. Of the theoretical persuasions that were prevalent then, the theory of cultural relativism opened up possibilities for the identifications of the distinctive features of the peasant societies. The search for the dimensions which would differentiate primitives from peasants was initiated. A. L. Kroeber’s *Anthropology* (1948) is usually credited with setting forth 'peasantry' as a concept for anthropology. Kroeber formulated the existing conceptual categories of society and thereby drew the attention of the social anthropologist to peasantry who were earlier studying exclusively the small tribes and closed folk communities.

The first full-length study of a peasant community came in 1930 with the publication of Robert Redfield’s *Tepozltan* which dealt with an Aztec and Spanish speaking pueblo of some 4,000 people in northern Morelos, not far from Mexico City but comparatively isolated. After a series of studies in Mexico, Redfield formulated the concept of folk–urban continuum. While folk society refers to the communities of the past, the urban society represents the contemporary living. Between these two ends, the peasant society is regarded as an intermediate concept. This continuum generated a group of studies in anthropological literature (Beals 1946; Embree 1939; Lewis 1951; Redfield and Rojas 1934). It is only during this period that the study of peasant society assumed greater scholarly importance. Redfield noted the study of the peasant, “a recognizable and long enduring human type” providing a kind of bridge between primitive isolation and civilizations. According to him, the study of peasantry “calls for new thoughts and procedures of investigation” thereby making anthropology “very much more interesting”.

**Emergence of Peasant as an analytical category**

Though the social scientists of diverse intellectual persuasions have studied peasants in different times, the concept ‘peasant’ has never been used consistently or unambiguously and some have employed the term as if it is a self-explanatory concept. 'Peasant' is not used as an analytic category, nor is it even taken as a term that calls for definition. A. L. Kroeber who developed the

---

4See Robert Redfield. *Peasant society and Culture*, 1956 p. 69, 141
idea of peasant society as an intermediate between part societies and part cultures defined peasants as those who “constituting part societies with part cultures, definitely rural, yet live in a relation to a market town…. (those who ) lack the isolation, political autonomy and self-sufficiency of tribal population, yet their local units maintain much of their old identity, integration and attainment to the soil”. This has led to dispute and contention in peasant studies because both the tribal cultivators and modern farmers have also a claim to the title of peasant. The term 'peasant' continued to appear casually in the rural studies. Even the studies made in the quarter-century after Redfield’ Tepoztlan, (like Redfiled’s ChanKom: A Maya Village (with Villa Rojas); and The Folk Culture of Yucatan; Arensberg's The Irish Countrymen and Family and Community in Ireland (with Kimball); Chapman's Milocca: A Sicilian Village; Embree's Suye Mura: A Japanese Village; Fei's Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley; Lewis's Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Restudied; Beals's Cherdn: A Sierra Tarascan Village; Foster's Empire's Children: The People of Tzintzuntzan; and so on) continued to have this ambiguity. While some have viewed peasant as 'a way of living, a complex of formal organization, individual behavior, and social attitudes, closely knit together for the purpose of husbanding land with simple tools and human labor', others have used the term as synonymous to farmers. S. Silverman rightly commented, ‘the term is rarely defined but rather is used as if it were self-explanatory, with the common dictionary meaning of rustics who work the land’.

Perhaps the first analytic use of the peasant as a concept is that of Raymond Firth in Malay Fishermen: Their Peasant Economy (1946). Here, Firth used the term as 'a socio-economic category,' and justified its application to non–cultivators. His explicit criteria were economic: small-scale producers with nonindustrial technology relying primarily on what they produce for their subsistence. Thus, he included in the category small-scale producers other than cultivators who shared the 'same kind of simple economic organization', as he mentioned in his Elements of Social Organization (1951). He added, however, '... and community life,' and then goes on to talk about the 'folk' character of these communities. Later in an essay 'Capital, Saving and Credit in Peasant Societies' published in 1964, Firth extended the term to 'other non-agricultural "countrymen" also, who share the social life and values of the cultivators... ' because 'they are

---

part of the same social system'. Firth’s definition seems too broad and it makes it difficult to distinguish peasants from non-peasants as he extended the term to non-cultivators like artisan and fisherman into such category.

It was only in the mid-1950s, that the 'peasant' was established as an analytic category and a subject matter in its own right. In his 1953 *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, Robert Redfield, the pioneers among the anthropologists in the field of peasant studies, discusses 'the peasant. . . as a human type'. In 1955, Eric R. Wolf published in the *American Anthropologist* the article 'Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion,' which begins with a section on 'The Peasant Type' that develops a definition of 'peasant' on the basis of three characteristics. Redfield's 1954 lecture at the University of Chicago on 'The Peasant's View of the Good Life' stimulated the philosopher F. G. Friedmann to organize a continuing symposium-by-correspondence entitled 'The Peasant: A Symposium Concerning the Peasant Way and View of Life,' which began with an exchange of letters among nine scholars. In 1956, Redfield published this lecture along with three others as *Peasant Society and Culture* and considered it as something of a postscript to the *Little Community*" in which he “thought of small communities as independent of things outside themselves.”

As outlined by Theodor Shanin in a seminal article, ‘Peasantry: delineation of a sociological concept and a field of study’ that appeared in *European Journal of Sociology* in 1971, the concept of peasantry is approached from four major conceptual traditions: (a) the Marxist class theory, (b) "the specific economy" typology, (c) the ethnographic cultural tradition, and the (d) Durkheimian tradition. Each of these traditions tends to stress a particular aspect of peasant livelihood and adopts a closely related approach to the analysis of social change and of disintegration of peasantry in the "modern world". While Marxist approach has approached peasantry in terms of power relationships, the type of economy tradition viewed peasant in terms of the specific ways in which a family-farm operates. The ethnographic cultural tradition, which stems from the East-European ethnography as well as from traditional Western anthropology treats peasants as the representatives of an earlier national tradition, preserved through "cultural lag", by the inertia typical of peasant societies. On the other hand, the Durkheimian tradition which divides societies into traditional and modern, places peasantry in an intermediate position between self-sufficient segments of the 'folk' societies and the modern societies of 'organic' interaction. Though
Kroeber laid the foundation for this tradition, Redfield developed it through a number of empirical studies.

**Robert Redfield: Conceptualisation and Reconceptualization of Peasantry**

In *Peasant Society and Culture*, Redfield viewed peasants as those small producers who make a living and have a way of life through cultivation of land. His definition or conceptual model of peasants and peasant society excludes many communities heretofore looked upon as peasant, and implies that peasants are either unaware of the profit motive or frown upon it. Unlike Firth, he does not include collectors, hunters, fishermen and herders in the concept of peasant. Further, Redfield follows scrupulously Eric Wolf to make the definition more specific. Eric Wolf in an article, “Types of Latin American Peasantry” published in 1955 in *American Anthropologist*, defines peasant as small scale agricultural producers whose concern is subsistence not reinvestment. To him, peasants do not look upon land as a capital commodity. Incorporating this idea of Wolf, Redfield confined the term peasants to those small agriculturalists for whom agriculture is a livelihood, not a business for profit. Adopting Kroeberian approach, he goes on elaborating the definition by saying that the culture of a peasant community is not autonomous, it is a dimension of the civilization of which it is a part. Hence, he explained the inclusive character of peasantry with the wider society through ‘great traditions’ and their ‘exclusive character’ by their own ‘little traditions’. Peasant society and culture, Redfield believes, has something generic about it, and is “a kind of arrangement of humanity with some similarities all over the world” Unlike primitive societies and cultures, the peasant varieties are not isolates complete in themselves but “bear side by side relations and up and down relations to primitive tribal peoples and to towns and cities.” In chapter IV of *Peasant Society and Culture*, Redfield gives us an interesting discussion of the peasants’ view of the good life and suggests the following characteristics: “an intense attachment to native soil; a reverent disposition toward habitat and ancestral ways; a restraint in individual self-seeking in favor of family and community; a certain suspiciousness, mixed with appreciation, of town life; a sober and earthy ethic.”

As noted by Silverman (1979), there are three specific elements in the Redfieldian approach to define peasants: ‘way of life, community and tradition. The 'way of life' was
characterized by certain cultural attributes in the sense of attitudes, values and other ideational elements. Redfield was placing theoretical emphasis on conventional understandings, world-views, styles of living, and above all, quality or life. Second, there is the assumption that peasants inhabit particular kinds of communities. ‘Community’ is used interchangeably with ‘village’ or other units or settlements for which the study of peasants is identified with the study of villages. Third, there peasants are viewed as ‘traditional’ (with reference to civilizational content) within a typological contrast between tradition and modernity.

Redfield’s conception of peasant and peasant society greatly influenced the subsequent conceptual discourse\(^6\). His influence was also prominent even in the definitions of scholars who emphasize economic or political dimensions of peasantry. Shanin in his article, ‘Peasantry: delineation of a sociological concept and a field of study’ in the *European Journal of Sociology* summarized briefly some of the main intellectual traditions within which the study of peasantries had advanced. He offered a general definition based on four principal characteristics of such groups such as (a) peasant family farm as the basic unit of multidimensional social organisation; (b) land husbandry as the main means of livelihood; (c) specific traditional culture; and (d) the underdog position. Though Shanin’s definition indicates Marxist/Leninist perspective on peasants, it also reflects Redfield’s influence while emphasising on organic bonds between peasantry, gentry and other social strata.

**Redfield tradition and discourse on Peasantry in India**

Though Redfield himself could not apply his analytical model which he developed in studies in Mexico to Indian context\(^7\), his seminal concepts on cultural relativism were examined, and their validity tested empirically in a number of village studies in the 1950s and the 1960s. Peasant studies, in a way, arrived in India with the village studies. Milton Singer applied the ‘Little tradition’ and ‘Great tradition’ model to understand the village social structure. Taking clues from


\(^7\)In fact, Redfield and Singer decided to concentrate on India as “‘a concrete and detailed example of developed method for at least one civilization.”’ In the fall of 1955, Redfield and his wife departed for India for fieldwork in the eastern region of Orissa, where Redfield thought, “the whole range of human civilizations” – everything from primitive forest dwellers to peasants to townspeople and “modern intellectuals” – could be found. Soon after arriving in India, however, Redfield fell ill and was advised to return immediately to Chicago.
Redfield, McKim Marriott came up with two complementary concepts explicating the twin processes of *Universalization* and *Parochialization*. Marriott's "universalization" and "parochialization" are recognized by Redfield as the first effective articulation of the mutual ingress of great and little traditions. Oscar Lewis added to this inventory the concept of *Rural Cosmopolitanism*. A critical examination of these concepts led S. C. Dube (1958) to propose a fivefold classification of Indian tradition as classical, regional, local, western, and emergent national.

Following Redfield’s approach of folk-urban continuum, the frameworks of tribe-caste, tribe-peasant, and rural-urban continuum generated a number of studies where a continuum of ‘Tribe’ to ‘Emergent Peasant’ or ‘Proto Peasant’ to ‘Peasant’ is developed (See for example, Bailey 1960, Bose 1962; Sinha 1965, Majumdar 1972, Bhandari 1978, Goswami 1978). Based on her study (appeared in *American Journal of Sociology* in 1962), Santi Priya explained the relevance of Redfield’s model of folk-urban value system and peasant behaviour in West Bengal. Drawing on Redfield, Surajit Sinha explains the process of change from the isolated, homogeneous and unstratified tribal society to the caste and peasant society. J. S. Bhandari (1978) coined the term ‘Emergent Peasant’ for a tribe which practices settles cultivation without being involved in the ‘Great tradition’ of the wider society. Goswami (1978) called the ‘Emergent peasant’ of Bhandari as ‘Proto-peasant’ for the same reasons. In a nutshell, as said by L. P. Vidyarthi, Redfield “... provided theoretical and methodological direction toward understanding the folk and peasant communities in India as dimensions of Indian civilization” (Vidyarthi 1978:19).

Though Redfield’s influence a set a new tradition of village studies in India which inspired peasant studies in sociology and social anthropology his conception of peasant and peasant society has raised many conceptual issues as evidenced in the works of scholars like F. G. Bailey and Andre Beteille. The lack of clarity in defining ‘peasant culture’ had led Redfield’s critics to deny altogether its usefulness. It is observed by B. B Choudhury (2008) that Redfield’s method of identifying ‘peasant society’ by comparing it with tribal society('primitive community’) and ‘urban society’ is questionable. He also adds Redfield’s ‘cultural’ criteria for distinguishing a peasant society are also too general to serve as a sound methodology for meaningful historical enquiry. The peasant ‘way of life’, ‘peasant values’ or ‘peasant world view’ are not reducible to a universally present set of attributes as ‘the way of life’ widely varied in time and place.
Based on his fieldwork in Orissa (now Odisha), F. G. Bailey's came forward with a different set of conclusions which are quite contrary to Redfield’s observations. While Bailey admits the ‘cognitive map’ that is, ‘the ethos, world view, collective representations, beliefs and values of peasants of particular villages or localities’, he denied universal validity for this ‘map’. His ‘The peasant view of the bad life’ goes against what Redfield means by peasant ‘way of’ life,’ ‘peasant values’ or peasant world view’. Bailey’s two major conclusions about the ‘peasant view of the bad life’ are important in this context. Firstly, he observed that peasants were distrustful of ‘outsiders’ and they look upon outsiders as their enemies. Secondly he rejects the romantic view of rural life; ‘its certainty and dependability’. Similar kinds of criticism were also made by Sutti Ortiz about the concept of ‘peasant culture’.

He argues that the factors which shape behaviour and ideologies are so numerous that it is unthinkable to imagine that individuals who are grouped together, because some of them share certain economic arrangements and face a particular kind of political domination, hold the same cultural values, cognitive systems, and very similar social organization. Again, even where peasants share a culture, their economic behaviour cannot be explained in terms of their attitudes, value and cognitive systems. Ideologies may guide behaviour, but may be used also to justify past acts which are motivated by other factors.

Beteille while explaining the concept of peasant society in his *Six essays in comparative sociology* argued that like other Western scholars, Redfield too assumed village as the homogeneous community of peasants and believed that those who live in the village are peasants and the village is place where peasants live and treated peasant as an undifferentiated lot separated sharply different from that of class societies. Taking the example of his own village study (Sripuram in Tamil Nadu), and citing a number other studies, Beteille points to the limitations of Redfield’s conception of peasantry in India. He says there are sections of people in rural India or in villages who do not fit the conception of peasantry as suggested by Redfield. In this context, he refers to the presence of a sizable Brahm community of holders of rent-free *agraharam* lands in Sripuram who did not directly cultivate the lands. For Beteille, this is the class of the gentry, and to call them peasants is to invite analytic failure. To him, given the complexities of Indian society, Redfield’s definition of peasantry may not be applicable to Indian situation. In this context, he writes, “Indian anthropologists do not appear to have pondered sufficiently on the specific

---

characteristics of Indian peasants and have assumed that they must be same as those of peasants everywhere”. However, it is commented that Beteille overstressed the taxonomic concerns of Redfield’s approach\textsuperscript{10}. It appears the peasant, for Beteille, is the small owner-cultivator; the agrarian worker may be admitted into the category when it is posited in opposition to the non-cultivating gentry, but the latter have to be beyond the pale.

Conclusion
Robert Redfield has contributed significantly to make anthropologists and sociologists dealing with India aware of the peasant society as the subject of study. His analytical approach provided a theoretical appreciation of folk and peasant communities in India as a dimension of civilization. Though the relevance of his conceptualization of peasantry is debatable in India particularly in the fast changing contemporary socio-economic context, Redfield’s tradition generated continued interest in peasant and village studies and dominated the anthropological sociological studies in the first few decades on rural India.

\textsuperscript{10} For details see, T N Madan’s review of Andre Beteille’s\textit{Six essays in comparative sociology} in \textit{The Indian Economic and Social History Review}, 1975, Vol. 12, No. 1.
Robert Redfield