

*On
Village Studies
in India*

Abstract

[The trend of "village studies" in India, from 1920-s to the present day, suggests the existence of virtually two different worlds of concepts and models, of analysis and interpretation, and of idioms of expression and inference with reference to the same topic as "village study". In this context, the author is of the view that the two streams of research carrying the imprint of economists and social anthropologists/sociologists, respectively, should meet at relevant sites. Alternatively, bridges will have to be built at the places if confluence of the streams cannot be achieved. For, until and unless the "economic" and "social" perspectives meet at critical points, it is not possible to obtain a composite understanding of village life and a balanced view of the dynamics of village society.]

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THE deterioration in India's rural economy, set in a century earlier and spreading insidiously over the sub-continent because of the lack of effective checks (Dutt 1950), came up clearly on the surface from the beginning of the present century. The end of the First World War unveiled the abject poverty, squalor, and disorganization of village societies; the rumblings of rural discontent began to reach the ears of the Government and the educated public in towns and cities.

The Government had to take a serious note of the imminent agrarian crisis; leading to the appointment of the first Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1926. Sympathetic private bodies and individuals also became interested, rendering a political and/or economic slant to the situation.

It was in this critical phase of India's history that "village studies", in the sense the label is employed today, took its birth in order that facts and figures could be gathered for an objective understanding of how the rural folks live, what are their wants, and why are they obliged to lead a sub-human existence.

Contextually, the Indian National movement played a significant role. For one of its fruitful bye-products was to create interest of social scientists in "village studies". The mass movements of 1920-s, led by

Gandhi and based essentially on the rural question, synchronized with series of "village studies" carried out in different parts of India. Patel has succinctly summarized the situation:

"With the end of the First World War, the beginning of an agrarian crisis was accompanied by the entry of peasants into the political arena, as exemplified during the Champaran and Kaira Campaigns led by Gandhiji. As a result, the cultivator of the soil began to attract considerable attention from students of Indian society. G. Keatings and Harold Mann in Bombay, Gilbert Slater in Madras, and E.V. Lucas in the Punjab, initiated intensive studies of particular villages and general Agricultural problems. The results of these investigations evoked great interest and stressed the necessity for still further study." (Patel 1952: 1).

In 1930-s, many more scientists, administrators, and politically imbued social workers joined forces. "Village studies" began to be carried out extensively all over India by organizations and individuals.

The Punjab Board of Economic Enquiry went on organizing village surveys conducted by individual workers (since 1920-s). The Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry was set up and it undertook village surveys (1935); some in collaboration with the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta (Chakravarti 1937). Tagore's Visva-Bharati organized village surveys around Santiniketan, Bengal, under the auspices of the Visva-Bharati Rural Reconstruction Board and at the individual initiative of Sri Kali Mohan Ghosh (data partly processed in Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1946; Mukherjee 1957; &c.). Professors Bhattacharya and Natesan of Scottish Church College, Calcutta, published accounts of village life in Bengal as collected by their students from respective villages (1932). The same was done by Professors Thomas and Ramakrishnan of Madras University (1940) with reference to the south Indian villages previously surveyed under the guidance of Gilbert Slater. The Cochin State published accounts of individual villages under the authorship of T.K. Sankara Menon (1935) Subramanian published the survey of a south Indian village under the auspices of the Congress Economic and Political Studies (1936). Gujarat Vidyapeeth persuaded Professor J.C. Kumarappa to undertake the survey of Matar Taluka in Gujarat (1931); and his work synchronized or was followed by those of G. C. Mukhtyar (1930), J. B. Shukla (1937), and others in Gujarat. Village surveys were also taken up in Maharashtra by the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona (Gadgil and Gadgil 1940, and others) And so it went on with studies undertaken by organizations and by individuals themselves.

Significantly, for these studies the field under focus was the economic life of the people; so that the pressing problems of rural society could be exposed in bold relief. Slater, one of the pioneers in "village studies" in India, wrote in his introduction to the study of "Some South Indian Villages":

"Villages came before towns, and even in the most industrialized countries, where all economic questions tend to be studied from an urban point of view, it is well to be reminded that the economic life of a town or city cannot be understood without

reference to the lands which send its food and raw materials, and the villages from which it attracts young men and women. The importance of rural activities and of village life in India, in view of the enormous preponderance of its agricultural population over that engaged in mining, manufacture, commerce and transport, is not likely to be overlooked; and least of all in Southern India, which has no coal mines and no great industries like cotton manufacture in Bombay and jute in Bengal." (Slater 1918: 1).

Mann wrote in the Preface to his second study of a Deccan village.

"The study of rural conditions by close inquiry into the circumstances of a single unit, be it village, parish, or estate, has come to the front prominently in recent years as a method of social and economic investigation. And by the use of this method, if the villages to be studied are well chosen, a very much more intimate acquaintance with the actual conditions of life than by any other method can be obtained." (Mann and Kanitkar 1921: iii).

Kalelkar wrote in his introduction to J.C. Kumarappa's "An economic Survey of Matar Taluka":

"If there is one thing that characterises the educated man in India and distinguishes him from his *confines* elsewhere, it is his abysmal ignorance of the actual rural conditions in his own country. There are some people who are anxious to see India industrialised. There others are who will be content if India got back her own. But neither of them have secured the bed rock of statistics collected from the mouths of the peasants themselves. The present survey is unique in this respect." (Kumarappa 1931: vii).

Economics and material wellbeing of the rural folks had thus become the preoccupation with those undertaking "village studies," as the situation then dictated.

In 1940-s also the orientation of social scientists towards "village studies" remained virtually the same as before. Only it could be noticed that henceforth they began to launch *extensive enquiries* by covering large tracts in the light of the picture of rural society already built up by means of the ever-increasing numbers of isolated "village studies". Concurrently, they were often found to concentrate on specific aspects of the "rural problem" in a particular area.

Thus the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, undertook series of sample survey of Bengal villages in order to ascertain the effects of the 1943 famine on rural society (Mahalanobis *et al* 1946); to estimate the extent of rural indebtedness or to portray the condition of agricultural labourers in society (Indian Statistical Institute 1948); and so on. Other organizations also made similar attempts, the details of which are not of immediate concern (e.g., Iyenger 1951).

Likewise, the Government Departments, Central and Provincial, undertook extensive studies; such as the Agricultural Labour Enquiry of the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, since 1948 (published from 1954 onwards). And individuals also contributed their mite in this venture. For example, Sayana of the Bombay School of Economics and Sociology undertook sample survey of Telegu-speaking districts of the Madras Province, along with the collation of relevant data from official and non-official sources, in order to study the "Agrarian Problem of Madras Province" (Sayana 1949).

The upshot was that by 1950 the minimum of basic knowledge had been accumulated, at any rate, to attempt estimating the national income of rural India with reasonable precision, to formulate plans and programmes for India's rural development, and to sponsor studies on an all-India scale for the planned development of India in the future.

This is evident from the reports of the National Income Committee set up by the Government of India in 1949 (e.g., *The First Report* 1951), from the precise formulations of rural economic problems in the plans propagated by the Government of India or private bodies, from the inauguration of the Government of India National Sample Survey in 1950 (*viz. General Report No. 1*, 1952), etc., etc.

II

This course of development and outcome of "village studies" meets evidently an important need of the country and the government. So it may not be fortuitous that from a different ulterior motive it was brought up by the British East India Company as early as in 1689.

Those were the days when the Directors of the Company were becoming interested in controlling land and people in India instead of indulging in mere trading activities along with contemporary European and Indian rivals. Pursuantly, they wrote to their agents in India:

"The increase of our revenue is the subject of our care, as much as our trade:— 'tis that must maintain our force, when twenty accidents may interrupt our trade; 'tis that must make us a nation in India;—without that we are but as a great number of interlopers, united by his Majesty's royal charter, fit only to trade where nobody of power thinks it their interest to prevent us;—and upon this account it is that the wise Dutch, in all their general advices which we have seen, write ten paragraphs concerning their government, their civil and military policy, warfare, and the increase of their revenue, for one paragraph they write concerning trade" (Quoted by Mill 1838: i, 87-88).

In the present context, the aspirations of the East India Company for political power over India, as narrated elsewhere (Mukherjee 1958 a), do not concern us. What, however, would be of interest to note is that after the futile attempt of the Company in this direction at the end of the seventeenth century the successful attempts made since the middle of the eighteenth were followed by increasing awareness of the foreign power to know more and more about life and living in the sub-continent. Because, for good or bad, for the welfare of the people or for the exploitation of the masses, it is necessary to know at the outset how the society is organized and how the people live.

Here, therefore, we need not dwell upon the policy which sponsored from the beginning of the nineteenth century the extensive (although sketchy) collection of information on how the Indian people live in villages. Such as the Company's requisition of the services of Dr. Francis Buchanan from 1800 in order to report on the conditions in towns and villages in Madras, Mysore, Bihar, Bengal, etc. (Buchanan-Hamilton 1807).

We need not also refer to the genuine interest in the welfare of the people which prompted a number of foreign administrators and scientists to undertake relevant investigations in villages and in broader regions, mainly from the beginning of the twentieth century. Such as the study of a British administrator in India on the economic life of a Bengal district (Faridpur) in the first decade of the present century which he undertook on his own initiative and as a labour of love (Jack 1916).

What we must note, instead, is that infrequent and usually a generalized version of the situation as they were, these efforts built the monumental gate-way to the path of development of "village studies" in India

The path, however, remained narrow and not yet fully reinforced even after several decades of conducting "village studies." Because in all these days engrossing attention was showered on rural "economics." A change in the depth of focus of the pictures emerging from the investigations was therefore called for.

Namely, to the pioneers in the field the individuals and the social groups were living entities with reference to the economic activities they were engaged in. The *institutional* approach, in the sense it endeavours to portray the "organized, purposeful system of human effort and achievement" (Malinowski 1944: 51), was possibly not deliberate. It was spontaneous as one might expect in unsophisticated keen observers. But in the course of development of "village studies" during 1920-50 the emphasis was laid increasingly on purely economic categorization of rural society; and even the *social relations* which the villagers had evolved with reference to their economic organization were not attended to properly or at all.

Such as the number of gainfully occupied persons in a village, their affiliation to respective sectors of the national economy (as agriculture, handicraft production, etc.), the type of job they performed (such as non-manual or skilled manual occupation, etc.), and their activity status (as employer, employee, own-account worker) were the usual subject-matter for analysis. But the bearing of the presence of these individuals in society in terms of the relations which had emerged among themselves on account of their work and earnings, the relations which had crystalized within and between the societal groups incorporating one or the other of these persons, and such other facets of social relations evolving out of the economic organization of society were hardly touched upon.

Or, the income distribution, landholding, the expenditure pattern, and such other economic attributes of the villagers were often treated in meticulous details; but the social relations the rural folks had developed with respect to such economic attributes were, almost invariably, lost sight of. Similar examples may be cited in numbers.

As a result, even in terms of only such organized, purposeful systems of human effort and achievement as refer to the economic sphere of society not enough has been learnt so far as how the relevant individuals,

the co-resident and commensal kingroups (viz. residential family-units), the kingroups of larger dimensions, or other varieties of societal units characterized by the involuntary and voluntary groupings of the villagers are integrated with one another with reference to the economic appellations of their constituent members.

Indeed, we know very little today about the structural and functional alignments in village society consequent to the economic activities of the people, not to speak of other aspects of their life. For the preoccupation of the social scientists with the "economics" of rural society, which became more and more pronounced since 1940-s, began to push the living persons in the background; and instead of presenting the villagers as *social beings* presented them (with increasingly finer precision no doubt) as abstract economic and statistical categories.

III

To be sure, there was, there is, and there will remain the need for such specialized studies. But equally, it began to be felt, there is the need to take up "village studies" from *another* perspective; the perspective formulated and interpreted by cultural and social anthropologists and sociologists in contradistinction to that evolved by the economists from an earlier period.

This felt-need began to be satisfied by the publications coming out since 1950-s. The late Professor Majumdar, one of those who undertook the task, had aptly described the situation.

"Of late, in India, we have a spate of literature on our rural life. Some have been written by foreign scholars, some by Indians. Some of these studies have been monographically oriented, as for example, Srinivas's 'Mysore Village' or Dube's 'Indian Village'. Some are problem oriented, as one discovers in the various anthologies, published in anthropological or social science journals or in the *Economic Weekly*. The West Bengal Government has published a volume of essays on Indian village life and problems edited by M. N. Srinivas. McKim Marriott has edited a series of articles on Indian rural life, under the title *Village India*, while the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Uttar Pradesh, has published a volume on *Rural Problems*, the first of a series of village studies. All these indicate the interest the anthropologists are taking in rural assignments. Some of these studies are intimate, intensive and competent, some are superficial; and no doubt, some have raised our expectations, for they have focused attention on the many problems of rural life which demand priority in the context of the planning for the countryside, which is the avowed goal of our planners." (Majumdar 1958: 326-327).

It is not the contention of the writer to comment on the writings of individual anthropologists and sociologists who have thus given a *new look* to "village studies". Obviously, at the initial stage of such a venture there would be some hasty generalizations, occasionally narrow specialization, or, infrequently, dogmatic adherence to an intriguing concept. But these are minor blemishes on the edifice that is being built by this attempt; an edifice which will serve the purpose of presenting, eventually, a balanced view of the forces at work in rural society and a harmonious picture of the course of life pulsating therein.

I thus comment on the lack of a balanced view of the dynamics of rural society and on the incomplete picture of rural life we are presented with even after this new venture. And I note, concurrently, that this will have to be achieved. There is an important reason for subscribing to this viewpoint.

Namely, although most of the studies falling under the recently sponsored scheme are of substantial worth, they swing to specialization similar to those of contemporary economists but at the other extreme. The twain do not meet. Or they meet seldom, and there again in most instances inconsequentially. A composite picture of rural society has, therefore, yet to be exposed.

Thus, with reference to the same subject as "village study", an economist may be found to dwell on the theme of "proletarianization" of the mass villagers as indicative of the dominant phenomenon in rural society. Whereas a social anthropologist or sociologist would be complementarily concentrating his attention on the role of *dominant caste* in a village, on *casteization* or *sanskritization* of the rural folk, etc.

Is there a link between the two processes or are they independent of each other? And if a link is there, what does it stand for vis-a-vis the dynamics of rural society? Would it not be useful to explore that link for a harmonious picture of the life pulsating in a village?

In the same way as for the above example, with respect to village as an entity the economist may speak of "closed" versus "vulnerable" economy and elucidate the concept by pointing out "sub-marginal" productive and service enterpriser in a "self-sustaining economy". The social anthropologist or sociologist, on the other hand, may treat the village as a *unit hierarchically structured* and may elucidate rural life as a "concept" based on kinship ties, caste-wise integration, and the *jajmani* system. But is it not possible to combine the two aspects of rural society and obtain thereby a fuller understanding of the course of life therein?

Similarly, an economist interested in the *social accounting* of a village may discuss the problem of evaluation of "non-monetary income and outgoings in family-household enterprises" while a social anthropologist or sociologist who considers the village as a "constellation of values" may elaborate on the particular value system of rural folks, on the concepts of *parochialization* versus *universalization*, etc. But, again, would not the superimposition of these two facets of rural life yield a better harvest?

Or, both being concerned with explaining current changes in village society, an economist may point out the growing phenomenon of *entrepreneurship* in rural areas and the emergence of a *class* in village society with improved means and techniques of production and distribution, etc. Whereas a social anthropologist or sociologist may describe the content of the "urbanization process" in rural areas against the schematic formulation of *rural-urban continuum* and may ascertain the role of "village

elite" in that context. But there, again, it may be desirable to bring the two sets of phenomena in focus simultaneously so as to appreciate the crucial character of the emergent leadership in rural society.

Many more instances could be cited to illustrate how even the complimentary aspects of village life are emphasized unilaterally by the economists and the social anthropologists or sociologists in two different directions, without attempts being made to link up the two equally useful lines of study. And, then, there are obviously such other aspects of village life as fall under the respective fields of specialization of an economist, a social anthropologist or a sociologist.

The upshot is that today we encounter, virtually, two different worlds of concepts and models, of analysis and interpretation, and of idioms of expression and inference concerning the same topic as "village study."

IV

No doubt, the separation and the current parallel development of these two perspectives in "village study" substantiate the fact that this branch of study has passed its stage of adolescence and has attained adulthood. So that the *social* investigation of villages may be conducted on its own merit as already accorded to the *economic* investigation of the same. For, on the one hand, both would enrich our knowledge of the social organism under reference, and, on the other, there are certain distinctly important nuances of life and living in a village which can be elicited by only one of the two approaches respectively.

Thus, when describing the economic structure of a village, Dube concentrates his attention on the relation between the caste-affiliation and the occupation of respective villagers (Dube 1955: 57 f.). Thereby he certainly departs from the no less useful procedure followed by economists; such as the relation between land ownership/utilization and occupation of the same villagers, their activity status with reference to different sectors of the national economy, etc. But the picture Dube presents by following his line of analysis is an addition to our store of knowledge regarding village societies which was lacking in the picture presented by economists, although some of them may have noted the caste affiliation of villagers as merely one of the many ways of classifying a village society or may have mentioned in passing the association of *some* castes with *certain* facets of its economic organization.

Also, while noting as above the utility of "village studies" by social anthropologists or sociologists, we may comment on the usefulness of exposing by means of relevant conceptual tools the specifically *social* characteristics of village society. Such as the relative position of a village in the spectrum of *rural-urban continuum*; or the working of a particular process of acculturation in rural society under the labels of *sanskritization*, *parochialization*, etc.; and so on.

And, concurrently, we may note the distinct importance of portraying

the peculiar and specific *way of life* of a village, as Rosser has done for instance (Rosser 1960: 77-89).

Briefly, therefore, there is no ground to denounce, or even undermine, the intrinsic merit of "village studies" usually conducted by social anthropologists and sociologists. But, all the same, the point remains that the two streams of "village studies" carrying the imprint of economists or social anthropologists/sociologists, respectively, must meet at relevant sites. Alternatively, bridges will have to be built at the places if confluence of the streams cannot be achieved.

For it is the causal or concomitant relations among *economic and social* (including *ideological*) traits of a people which lead to the emergence of specific societal organizations and the formulation of distinct ideological orientations of their constituent members. Also these are the relations which either maintain the current structural and functional alignments in society or engineer their respective courses of change or transformation. So that, until and unless the "economic" and "social" perspectives towards "village studies" meet at critical points, it is not possible to obtain a composite understanding of village life and a balanced view of the dynamics of village society.

Evidently, the demand may not be met in a single study unless it is an omnibus one. For we find that, justifiably, specialized studies in the economic or the social field call for respective volumes. Pursuantly, specialized investigations in the above respect also should be included in the curriculum for "village studies".

V

The aim, thus outlined, is not of mere academic interest to one with a squeamish taste for the *total* knowledge. This is also not the means to feed a doctrinaire because of his preoccupation with the finding of so-called "economic" motivation to each and every societal manifestation. On the contrary, it has a distinct usefulness. Because it meets one of the imperative requisites to appreciate the governing processes within a social organism by the cross-fertilization of the "economic" and the "social" factors instead of depending upon the subjective assumptions and interpretations of either of the two schools of social scientists to *fill in the gap* in this respect.

Moreover, the need for such an attempt is underlined in the context of our present-day situation, as Professor Firth had noted very forcefully more than a decade ago.

"India is beginning to learn the lesson that the price of political freedom is economic responsibility. The sympathy extended to her in her struggle for independence is needed in manifold measure now, in her struggle to abate the grinding rural poverty of so many of her people. It can hardly be denied that some solution of the pressing agrarian problem of India is crucial to the survival of her present political system. More than that, it is crucial to the survival of many of her citizens.

"Most of the books and articles about the agrarian problems of India that reach

the Western reader are analyses of a general kind. They tell us of India—and leave us with a feeling of ignorance as to just how these problems affect different groups and classes of the people in different places. They talk of economics—and leave untouched those social alignments and social values which give the economic system its meaning. Or they talk about the social background as something which simply inhibits the development of free economic enterprise and efficiency—in terms of caste taboos and sacred cows and sacred monkeys—and leave untouched the solid satisfactions to be found in the family and kinship system, in the caste associations and reliances, and even in the complex ritual evaluations of animals which share with man something of what he believes to be the divine spirit." (Firth 1952: v).

In the light of our achievements till today as regards the *motivation to change* in rural society, the words of Professor Firth ring a topical note. For, even after half a century's efforts to understand and appreciate village life in India, we are not certain, as yet, as to which are the *soft spots* in the social organism through which a desired course of change could be introduced in rural society (Mukherjee 1962).

For instance: is it the "proletarianized" rural mass and/or the numerically "dominant caste" placed low in the caste hierarchy which is to be the harbinger of a *new life* in villages? Alternatively, would the charge devolve upon the landed gentry and/or the top-ranking Caste Hindus?

Likewise, would the carriers of *new values* to rural society be the growing "rural intelligentsia" or the dumb millions who have their "education" in the hard way? And should we go on considering, similarly, other distinctly "social" and/or distinctly "economic" groups in society in order to unravel the course of change therein?

Or, instead of such formal and mutually distinct economic and social categorizations of the rural folk, is it a symbiosis of their various economic and social attributes which should lead us to the diagnosis of relevant soft spots in the social organism under reference?

Evidently, in consideration of its theoretical value as well as its practical implications, a course of research in this direction has been called for since a long time. But, falling in no-man's land between "economics" and "social anthropology or sociology" as two different disciplines of study, its progress has been halting and hesitating. So that achievements in this line have been very little so far; in quantity, at any rate.

From among the economists, possibly the investigations of J. P. Bhattacharjee (1958) and of Baljit Singh (1961) stand out in this respect. From the other side, A. C. Mayer's *Land and Society in Malabar* (1952) falls in the line; his *Caste and Kinship in Central India* (1960) is also not out of the path. *Six Villages of Bengal*, surveyed during 1941-45 and published as late as in 1958, was also a feeble venture of the present writer in this field; leading him at a later date to discuss *The Dynamics of a Rural Society* (1957). F. G. Bailey's *Caste and the Economic Frontier* (1958) is a distinct contribution in the same field; and his explorations in the wider field of *Tribe, Caste, and Nation* (1960) follow therefrom.

Contextually it should be noted that some studies of social scientists in East Pakistan (formerly a part of the Indian sub-continent) also give the indication of a similar orientation. Such as of Husain as an economist (Husain 1956), and of some social anthropologists as found in the volume *Social Research in East Pakistan* edited by Pierre Bessaignet (1960).

Thus, irrespective of the relative merits of these studies, we find that attempts have been made in the desired direction in the last ten or twelve years. But such studies remain intermittent and relatively scarce. Should we not therefore, undertake more such studies; and with, possibly, pointed relevance?

VI

The question may be raised at this stage of our discussion as to which of the two schools of specialists, viz. economists and social anthropologists or sociologists, should undertake the task.

This is a moot question. But it is also a question that we are facing frequently these days on other courses of social research because of the significant development of different disciplines of study under the banner of social sciences. And so a quick answer may be provided as that interdisciplinary research in the fields of economics, social anthropology and sociology, and psychology is the *sine qua non* of the present-day position of "village studies" just as it is with respect to almost all other aspects of the study of social beings.

But the answer, however perfect, may not be the most practicable one; in a large number of cases, at any rate. Alternatively, therefore, we may note that as the study of group relations evolved in a society with respect to all the activities of its constituent members falls directly under the terms of reference of social anthropology and sociology, the task should devolve upon them particularly.

Even so, the question would not be fully answered. Because we should note concurrently that if the term of reference to the economists be acclaimed as the study of relations among men with respect to material goods and services instead of as that between man and material goods and services (Sweezy 1956: 4-5), they could not also be exempted from shouldering the burden. And if the psychologists are not to indulge in researches on human beings in a rarified "personal" situation only, they would also have to accept the responsibility equally with economists, social anthropologists, and sociologists.

Thus the frontiers of the three disciplines do meet in the field of "village study", and so scientists duly equipped to cross the no-man's land between the disciplines should also be forthcoming.

The question therefore does not boil down to which discipline should undertake the task or that it can be accomplished only by interdisciplinary research. Contrariwise, the question throws up the challenge to create interest among those belonging to any one of the disciplines to

assume the responsibility and equip themselves accordingly.

So that where the necessary facilities are available, inter-disciplinary research may be undertaken for this course of "village studies". And if such facilities cannot be provided with, as it is likely in many instances, duly-equipped scientists from any one of the disciplines must undertake the task as a distinct course of research.

I am inclined to the view that thereby we shall fulfil a very important objective of social research, both theoretically and as applied. For this reason, I have written this note in order to bring forward the plea to my colleagues.

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