

12. Mircea Eliade, *loc. cit.* p. 4.
13. Mircea Eliade, *loc. cit.* p. 5.
14. Mircea Eliade, *loc. cit.* p. 27-28.
15. Mircea Eliade, *loc. cit.* p. 34.
16. Hannah Arendt. 195. *The Human Condition*, Chicago, passim.
17. Hannah Arendt, *loc. cit.* p. 233-234.
18. Robert K. Merton. 1949. *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill., (Chapter on "Latent and Manifest Functions").
19. Ralf Dahrendorf. 1959. *Class and Class—Conflict in an Industrial Society*, London.
20. Josef Pieper. 1960. *Prudence*, London, p. 47.
21. A. K. Coomaraswamy. 1943. *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York, p. 28
22. A. S. Eddington. 1935. *The Nature of the Physical World*, London.
23. For a critique of the Marxist system see A. K. Saran, "The Marxist Theory of Social Change" in *Inquiry* (Oslo). Spring 1963. Vol. 6,

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## Possibility Of An “Indian Sociology”

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There is widespread concern among sociologists in India over the future of their discipline in the country. It appears to many that not only has Sociology failed to make sufficient headway, it has not been able even to chart a clear course for its development.

Uneasiness in this regard is widely shared, but the reasons given for this and the remedies suggested vary considerably. It is often pointed out that the chief cause of the inadequate growth of sociology in India lies in its weak moorings in the soil of the country. It is said that we have leaned too heavily on the theories developed by western scholars, which are unsuited to Indian conditions. Thus, a plea is made for the development of an "Indian Sociology."

However, the term "Indian Sociology" can be interpreted in a number of ways. In our task of exploring the possibility of the development of an Indian Sociology, it seems worthwhile to analyse the more important meanings which this term may cover in its varying uses. Broadly speaking, the term Indian Sociology may be employed to cover one or more of the following meanings:

A body of concepts and generalisations applicable specifically to Indian society and culture;

Sociological principles derived from traditional Indian sources;

The study of social structure and social processes in India;

Sociology as it has developed in India.

Obviously, these denotations and connotations of the term "Indian Sociology" are not necessarily exclusive of each other. In fact, two or three of these usually go together. For instance, very often when a plea is made for the development of a body of sociological knowledge relevant particularly to India (sense 1), an explicit or implicit assumption is that this can be done only on the basis of principles found in traditional Indian texts (sense 2). Similarly, the argument for developing sociological generalisations applicable specifically to India (sense 1) often implies the study of Indian social institutions and processes (sense 2) as a necessary prerequisite. The study of Indian social institutions as they have actually existed (3) and the various prescriptions and formulations laid down in ancient texts (2) are often dealt together in such a way that it is difficult to make out the one from the other. The use of the term Indian Sociology in the sense of a distinctive growth of the subject through the work of Indian sociologists, does not seem to be very common yet. It is generally recognised that sufficient work has not been done so far to justify us to speak of Indian Sociology in the same sense in which we speak of, for example, German Sociology. However, whenever the term is employed in this sense it may in all likelihood be associated with one or more of the senses mentioned earlier.

We have seen thus that the different possible meanings of Indian Sociology often go together. Yet it has been considered necessary to isolate them conceptually, because in various arguments in favour or against the possibility of Indian Sociology, they may occur in different combinations. A scholar who favours the growth of Indian sociology in one sense may not acknowledge its feasibility or desirability in some other sense. For instance, a sociologist may consider Indian society to be so distinctive that he may think it necessary to have a special body of sociological principles to deal with it; but he may not agree that it is necessary or desirable to depend upon ancient Indian texts to arrive at such knowledge. On the other hand, there may be scholars who feel that Indian contribution to sociology can be made only through the study, analysis and interpretation of traditional texts; but they at the same time believe that the results of such endeavour

would be beneficial not only for Indian society, but for societies all over the strife-torn world of today.

It is proposed, therefore, to discuss the possibility of the development of an Indian Sociology, with reference to each of the meanings that may be given to this term.

### ***Indian Sociology as a Special Body of Concepts and Generalisations***

The plea for the development of a special body of concepts and principles to cope with society and culture in India, implies an emphasis on the distinctive character of Indian socio-cultural phenomena. In other words, Indian society and culture are considered so different from elsewhere (particularly from Western society and culture, where modern social sciences have grown), that according to the proponents of this viewpoint an entirely different conceptual framework is required for any adequate understanding of these.

The crucial issue, therefore, is: *how far Indian society and culture are distinctive?* This question will be briefly explored here.

It may be agreed from the outset that Indian society has some distinctiveness. It is our assessment of the degree and nature of this distinctiveness, however, that will determine views on the need and possibility of Indian Sociology. Discussing personality, *Klukhohn has said that all men are like all other men; some men are like some other men; and every man is like no other man.*

A similar statement could be made regarding societies. Every society shares in common some features with all other human societies. For instance, the basic nature of social interaction (which involves the use of symbols) is fundamentally similar in all human societies. Then there are certain features which a society has in common with other societies. Tribal, peasant and industrial societies have certain institutional and cultural characteristics which societies of their own type only may share. Yet every society has certain attributes which may be distinctively its own. Only if Indian society has characteristics of the last kind in a sizable proportion, as compared to the attributes

of the first two kinds, can we justifiably plead for the development of Indian Sociology in this sense.

The need of developing a special conceptual and theoretical frame for the study of Indian society is pressingly felt when it is found that concepts and theories developed in the *West do not size up well, the Indian social reality*. The sociologist in India frequently faces this difficulty. To take a very elementary example: in general sociological terminology, "family" refers only to husband, wife and minor children; but when this concept is applied to India, it seems to refer to no real social institution, for family in India is a much wider unit. Similarly, the concepts of individuality, ego expression and personality development which are implicit in much of modern social science are not found to have great relevance to Indian conditions. Another example is provided by the distinctions usually drawn in contemporary sociology between urban and rural modes of life. In pre-modern India urban institutions and culture are found to be basically the same as they are in rural areas. Thus, the modern distinction appears to be untenable and inapplicable to Indian context.

However, without going into the merits of the arguments involved in the above illustrations, it can be said that similar arguments about the applicability of modern social science concepts could be advanced with equal force on behalf of most peasant and "underdeveloped" societies. For instance, family in most pre-modern societies is a much bigger unit than the standard sociological concept would lead us to believe. Taking human societies as a whole, actual family units have been much larger than the nuclear family. Indeed, some thinkers have argued that on a purely factual basis it will be more justifiable to refer to the modern Western family as the "contracted family" rather than designating the larger family units as "extended" or "joint".

The Indian family is similar to families in other peasant societies not only in size but in most of its basic attributes. It is interesting to see how the characteristics of family and familism described by Sorokin and Zimmerman for all rural societies based on subsistence agriculture fit in with the essential features of the traditional Indian family. They

observe that "*Familism is the outstanding and fundamental trait in the gestalt of such a society*",<sup>1</sup> and point out that all such societies are marked by early age of marriage; the existence of family as the unit of social responsibility and the basis of social norms; the impress of the family on state and kingship ; the predominance of cooperative rather than contractual relationships; the working of family as the unit of production, consumption and exchange; the existence of family cult and ancestor worship; and the dominance of tradition. It is not difficult to see from this, how closely the Indian family resembles in structure, spirit and function corresponding institutions in other peasant societies.

Similarly, the individualistic notions about personality are foreign not only to traditional India, but to most other traditional societies as well. In other such societies too, a man is expected not to develop an individuality all his own, but to conform as much as possible to the traditional archetype appropriate to his or her status and role. Anand K. Coomaraswamy has demonstrated the essential unity of all traditional societies in such matters in a number of *brilliant essays*.<sup>2</sup> According to Dr. Coomaraswamy and scholars, it is only the modern industrial civilization which other likeminded has deviated from the traditional path and has thereby become abnormal.

The existence of the same basic institutions and culture both in urban and rural areas is also not peculiar to India. It is a fairly common feature of pre-industrial societies. George M. Foster, in his essay "What is Folk-Culture"?<sup>3</sup> shows that the folk-culture always extends into the pre-industrial urban centres and a substantial portion of the population in these urban centres is active bearer of the folk tradition.

We find thus that even though many concepts and theoretical frameworks developed in the context of modern Western society do not fit in well with the social facts in India, this does not necessarily indicate the indispensability of an Indian sociology. On the other hand, the basic similarities between Indian society and other peasant societies lead us to think that what is really needed is a wider conceptual framework which could take care of as many pre-modern

societies as possible. Peasant societies based on plough agriculture have perhaps enough in common to warrant the development of such a framework.

It would appear that the similarities between pre-modern, traditional societies are not confined to the structural features alone there is evidence of deep sharing in cultural realm also. Even the Indian metaphysics is not a unique phenomenon. Writings of such scholars as Coomaraswamy, Rane Guenon, and Mahamahopadhyaya Gopi Nath Kaviraj and Schuon indicate that religious and metaphysical thinking everywhere shows a *transcendental unity*. Comparative studies of mysticism bring out the common pattern of mystic experience. In a recent work on *Tantra*, Mahamahopadhyaya Gopinath Kaviraj, the great scholar of Indian tradition, refers to many ideas and practices found in ancient Europe and Christian tradition which are essentially similar to the theory and practice of *yoga* and *tantra*.<sup>4</sup> The study of symbolism in ritual and mythology also reveals the basic similarity between Indian and other traditions.<sup>5</sup> The similarities in the character and course of life of the mythological hero everywhere are powerfully brought out by scholars like Joseph Campbell<sup>6</sup> and Lord Raglan.<sup>7</sup>

It is not only the elite sub-stratum of the Indian tradition which shares much in common with elite traditions in other civilizations. The tradition of the unlettered folk in India shows no less similarities with the folk cultures elsewhere. *Indian folktales share fully in what appears to be a common stock of world folklore motifs*. The same could be said about proverbs and riddles. But what appear even more striking are the similarities of form and content which the heroic poem popular among the Indian folk, share with the *Greek, Teutonic and central Asian heroic poems*. The characteristics of heroic poetry analysed by the Chadwicks<sup>8</sup> for ancient Greek and Teutonic heroic poems are present to an amazing extent in Indian heroic poems like the *Alha*. C. M. Bowra's study comparing heroic poetry among a number of Asian and European peoples confirms this conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Neither the Chadwicks, nor Bowra have discussed heroic poetry popular among the non-lettered Indian folk; but one who knows about

Indian heroic poems feels that these writers could have found their best illustrations from the tradition which is still vigorous in India. *Not only are the plots, characters and the style of Indian heroic poems similar to heroic poetry of societies far away in time and space, the whole spirit of these poems is the heroic spirit in its purest form*. Such facts lead one to think that the consciousness of Indian people is not essentially different from that of the people of comparable societies in other lands.

Having said all this about the social structure and the elite and popular cultural streams in India, a feeling still lingers that Indian society has something which distinguishes it from other societies. This need not be denied. The whole point is, how far uniqueness at this level will justify the building up of a special Indian Sociology.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the vaguely perceived spirit of a nation or national character is subject to various interpretations and unforeseen changes. The history of ideas regarding national character substantiates this abundantly. National characteristics which were believed once to be intrinsic are known to have radically changed. For instance, *"before the French Revolution the turbulence of the English was frequently contrasted by historians with the orderliness of the French"*.<sup>10</sup> But in the nineteenth century the French were looked upon as fickle. "Energy is a characteristic now commonly attributed to the English by Continental writers, but in the sixteenth century Meteren declared that Englishmen were as lazy as Spaniards, and this is confirmed by the testimony of other contemporary writers. The habits of personal cleanliness of the English have been attributed by some to their Nordic ancestry, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries commentators on English life refer continually to the 'extraordinary uncleanness of their habits and their persons; and Addison makes his wealthy London citizen think it worthwhile to record in his journal, as an event, the couple of times a week on which he had chanced to wash his face'".<sup>11</sup> Early observations about Germans are amusing in the light of later history. "The railways it was believed had no future in Germany owing to the inborn disposition of the Germans to '*hasten slowly*'".<sup>12</sup> Indeed some of the happenings in the

contemporary world have radically changed within the years the image of the characteristics of a nation in the eyes not only of others but perhaps of its own people also. With the concentrated impact of modern forces on Indian society, it is not improbable that its distinctiveness may be greatly reduced.

### Indian Sociology and the Traditional Indian Sources

The need to base Sociology in India on traditional Indian thought as found in ancient texts, is often emphasised. The plea is made not only by Indian scholars, but sometimes also by foreign sociologists. Dumont and Pocock observe: "The first condition for the development of a Sociology of India is found in the establishment of the proper relations between it and classical Indology".<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps nobody will deny that the study of traditional texts is necessary for a thorough understanding of Indian institutions; but there are bound to be a number of divergent opinions about the exact place such study should occupy in building up a sociology for India. Let us briefly explore the possibilities of developing an Indian Sociology on the basis of traditional texts.

The first difficulty which presents itself is that of the selection of the texts. On the basis of which of the texts is Indian Sociology to be built? *Rigveda*, the most ancient text, and one that is revered as revelation itself in Hindu tradition, does not tell us much about the institutions and values that are commonly regarded as the basic core of the Hindu way of life. To mention only one example: there is only one passage in the whole of the *Rigveda* which contains a reference to the four Varnas together, and this passage too is regarded by scholars to be of late origin. Many ritual patterns and prohibitions (e. g. on beef eating) now regarded as essential characteristics of Indian tradition are conspicuous by their absence. From this it is clear that traditional ideas themselves have undergone considerable changes; and it is very difficult to select any one era, or the writings of that era, as the only genuine basis of truly Indian Sociology.

In fact, various thinkers and law givers of ancient India were themselves conscious that the *Dharma* had been changing. Most

*Smritikaras* find it very difficult to approve of the more ancient custom of *niyoga*.

Moreover, on many matters there have been differences of opinion even in the same era. Ancient Indian works on, metaphysics, religion, aesthetics, statecraft, law and custom contain too many controversies to permit us to assume that there has been a single traditional viewpoint on all matters. The *Mahabharat* itself vividly and forcefully raises the perplexing problems of deciding what is right. It points out that authorities disagree and there is none whose opinion is dependable.

Another difficulty is that ancient writings do not clearly provide the material of a kind that could be easily moulded into a sociological discipline as we usually conceive it. Much of it is in the form of *prescription and prohibition*: what should be done, what must not be done. It does not provide us with the sort of correlations and generalisations which all sciences now seek to establish. Nor can we be sure that the institutions and norms referred to in the texts really existed. For, generally speaking *the aim of the texts is to lay down the norms; not to describe social reality at any particular time*. We cannot also assume that the ideas and theories contained in ancient text were responsible for the origin of particular institutions. Scholars, such as Hutton have argued that what is more likely is that the theories were put forward as rationalisations of institutions which already existed. If this is accepted, even partially, we shall have to go deeper into the historical factors in our quest for the reasons of origin and sustenance of social institutions; we cannot satisfy ourselves merely with the theoretical-metaphysical explanations found in the traditional texts.

Another fact which has to be taken into consideration is that the traditional texts are chiefly the *creations of the upper stratum of society*. They deal primarily with the institutions and values of the upper stratum and may conceivably represent the upper-class viewpoint. A large part of the prescriptions and prohibitions in the *Smritis* are irrelevant to the *Sudras* and the *outcastes* and this is often stated explicitly. Many passages in the *Smritis*, *Puranas* and other texts

leave the impression on the reader that they were meant perhaps to establish and perpetuate the privileged position of the Brahman and his progeny; and to justify and enforce through strong sanctions the low status of the Sudra and the untouchable castes.

Thus, it is very difficult to build up a sociology, merely on the basis of the internal evidence of ancient texts, even for pre-modern India. When we consider the problem in the context of contemporary India, matters are far more complicated. *New economic-technic, political-legal, and institutional- ideological forces have set in motion processes and problems which ancient texts could have hardly foreseen.* If we think that these texts should provide us with explanations about the social structure and processes as we find them today, perhaps we are expecting too much from them.

We have to recognise that whatever tradition of thinking about society existed in ancient India, is now no more available to us in a form which would make its development into modern science, an easy task. We know that chemistry and mathematics had attained a very high standard in ancient India, as compared to the standard of these discipline in other countries in those times. But if we now try to develop Indian chemistry and Indian mathematics, starting from what has been done in ancient India, this would obviously involve waste of effort. It is acknowledged that the analogy with chemistry and mathematics does not correspond perfectly. But the point of comparison is that we cannot afford to ignore the knowledge and concepts developed meanwhile without lagging behind unnecessarily.

It is interesting to note that even those scholars who advocate vehemently the indispensability of developing Indian sociology solely on Indian roots, that is on the basis of ancient metaphysical and social theories, *derive their knowledge of Indian tradition principally from the writings of modern western scholars.* This is not necessarily any evidence against the sincerity of these scholars, but it certainly brings out the difficulties involved in basing sociology in India on purely indigenous sources.

Sometimes one is tempted to think that the love for things Indian may paradoxically be, yet another form of “*xenophilia*”.<sup>14</sup> It may be an attraction of the same kind that the over-civilised man has for savage life, the sophisticated urbanite has for folk culture, and the western tourist has for oriental objects and antiques.

All this does not mean that the study of traditional texts is of no value for the sociologist in India. Without a proper analysis of these, in a wide historical perspective, our discussions of Indian institutions and values are bound to remain superficial; they may all be verifiable but they will not be adequately significant. *However, the possibility of building an Indian sociology solely based on the content of these text seems to be quite remote.*

### **Indian Sociology as the study of Social Structure and Processes in India**

“Indian Sociology” can also be conceived of as the study of Indian society and culture. This meaning will have the support of similar usage in other fields. For instance, in common usage, “Indian Economics” refers to the study of economic conditions and processes in India. It does not necessarily imply the existence of any special theoretical or conceptual framework. In a similar sense “*Indian Sociology*” can refer to the body of knowledge about *social structure, social control, social change and social problems* in India.

There is no fundamental objection to the use of the term in this sense. However, it has to be borne in mind that all science aims to widen constantly the applicability of its concepts and theories. As science progresses, laws applicable to limited fields are replaced by laws which are fewer in number but are more generally true. The sociologist too would not consider it the ultimate aim of his discipline to provide concepts and generalisations the *applicability of which is confined to particular nations.* If he has to begin with particular societies and cultures, the reason is the multifarious diversity of socio-cultural phenomena. However, like other scientists he too has constantly to endeavour to widen the range of his conceptual and theoretical apparatus.

Thus, the study of Indian social institutions and norms, and the change that they are undergoing, should pave the way for the development of an adequate framework for the study of peasant society and culture in other lands as well. It is well known that peasant societies which have contained the bulk of human population in the major part of the history of civilization, have been largely neglected both by the sociologist and the social anthropologist. *If we find the existing tools of the social science incapable of coping with Indian society and of culture, this neglect is greatly responsible for it.* Conversely, advances in the study of Indian society are sure to enhance our understanding of socio-cultural phenomena in general.

The sociologist in India has in this sense an excellent opportunity. If he studies in a scientific manner the society and culture of his own country, he will at the same time be making a basic contribution to the development of *social science as a whole*. The possibility of comparison between peasant and modern-industrial forms of society and *Weltanschauung* provides a rare opportunity of isolating the essential elements of all human association from their particular cultural manifestations. The condition for such endeavour seems to be that we devote ourselves chiefly to the study of Indian socio-cultural phenomena in their *continuity and change* but relate this study to the wider perspective of human society and culture as a whole.

### ***“Indian Sociology” as representing the Growth of the Discipline in India***

Sometimes when we qualify a subject with the name of a country, we refer to the particular form in which the subject has developed in that country. For instance, when we speak of German Sociology, we are indicating the stream of contributions made by sociologists in Germany.

Are we justified in speaking of “Indian Sociology” in this sense? The answer, it seems would depend on whether the contributions made by Indian sociologists are substantial enough or not; whether they have sufficient homogeneity of approach to justify a common label or not; and whether they have distinctiveness which marks them off from

contributions justifiably made by sociologists in other countries, or not. Only if all these criteria are adequately satisfied, we can speak of “Indian Sociology” in this sense. I think, we cannot yet be sure of great homogeneity in the approach of Indian sociologists. Remarkable distinctiveness of the contributions of Indian sociologists too is not easily discernible. Most of the great sociologists in India can be seen to have been influenced by various schools of thought or methodological approaches developed in the western countries. In such circumstances, the use of the term “*Indian Sociology*” in the sense of a distinctive school or approach does not seem to be warranted.

### **POSSIBILITIES**

We have seen that even though Indian society has some features of its own, this distinctiveness is not so fundamental as to necessitate the development of an "Indian Sociology" in the sense of a special conceptual and theoretical framework. Social facts in India do not yield properly to the existing tools of sociology not so much because they are Indian but because they are pre-modern, chiefly peasant. The task, therefore, is to develop the *general sociological theories, concepts and methodology* in such a way that they become more fully applicable to the study of non-Western civilizations. More and more study of society and culture in India and other countries similarly placed would itself immensely improve our existing sociological tools. It is true that the available theoretical and methodological resources of sociology are not adequate for the study of Indian society, but the remedy lies not so much in building a special Indian sociology but in *further refining the common tools*. This perhaps could be done on the following broad lines: 1. The existing theoretical and conceptual framework of sociology has to be divested of its Western ethnocentrism. 2. An attempt has to be made to evolve a theoretical system which does justice both to structural functional and dynamic aspects of society. Within the last few years, there has been a clearer recognition among sociologists that the study of the dynamic aspect

of society has been ignored for too long.<sup>15</sup> In the context of socio-cultural reality in India, which has a long and continuous tradition, the absence of a theoretical framework which has a built-in mechanism for coping with social dynamics is particularly telling. 3. Advances, both methodological and substantive, have to be made in the study of peasant society and culture in all parts of the world. This alone can bring out the various common and distinctive elements in particular peasant civilisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Sorokin and Zimmerman, *Systematic Sourcebook in Rural Sociology*, Volume II, page 41.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Anand K. Coomaraswamy "Status of Indian Women", *The Dance of Siva*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> American Anthropologist, 1953.

<sup>4</sup> Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. Gopinath, Kaviraj, *Tantrik Vangmaya Me Sakta Drishti*, Patna: The Behar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, 1963 pp. 246-49, *et passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (edited by Joseph Campbell), Washington 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Lord Raglan *The Hero*, London, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> H. M. Chadwick and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, Cambridge, 1932. See also, H.M. Chadwick *The Heroic Age*, Cambridge, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> C. M. Bowra, *The Heroic Poetry*, London, 1952.

<sup>10</sup> Morris Ginsberg "National Character and National Sentiments". *On the Diversity of Morals*, London: William Heinmann 1956, p 250.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 250.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 251.

<sup>13</sup> L. Dumont and D. Pocock, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. 1, The Hague: Monton & Company, 1957, p. 7.

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<sup>14</sup> For an interesting discussion of "xenophilia" among modern Indian elites see I. P. Desai, "The New Elite", *Economic Weekly*.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the papers of Talcott Parsons and others in *American Sociological Review*, June 1964.

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