

**The Place of Tradition in
Sociological Enquiry**
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The Place of Tradition in Sociological Enquiry

Tradition enters into sociological enquiry in two distinct though related ways. The first concerns the nature of tradition as a set of beliefs and practices, and their various forms in different places and at different times. The second concerns the tradition of sociological enquiry itself, its unity and diversity, and its roots in one or another general cultural or national tradition. Given the fact that there are several cultural and national traditions, is it possible or even desirable to have one single body of sociological concepts and methods to be applied to the interpretation and explanation of the entire range of social phenomena the world over? Thus, the topic I have chosen relates to the content as well as the method of sociological enquiry.

Of the two, it seems to me that the issue of method is the more difficult and the more contentious one. It is also an issue that is in some sense inescapable in the discipline of sociology. For, unlike economics and some other disciplines, sociology is, along with history, closely concerned with the understanding and interpretation of tradition. But, unlike history, sociology is comparative by deliberate choice; it cannot confine its attention to any single tradition as a unique and self-contained system, but must examine the similarities and differences among traditions. It is therefore important to ask how far the sociological method can detach itself from given historical and cultural traditions so as to examine all traditions in an objective and unbiased way.

Like most modern academic disciplines, sociology had its origins in the west. Since it is a relatively new discipline even there, it found a place in teaching and research in India within a few decades of its being established in Europe and America. But whereas one could speak of a German or an American tradition of sociology by the 1930s (Mannheim 1953: 185-228), one cannot even now speak with much conviction of an Indian tradition in the discipline. This is largely because in their teaching and research, Indian sociologists have drawn upon concepts, methods and theories already in use in the west instead of developing their own ones.

What sociologists do in this regard is hardly different from what is done by physicists or biologists, or even economists. But they worry more about their predicament than do the natural scientists. The relationship between data on the one hand and concepts, methods and theories on the other is in the human sciences different from what it is in the natural sciences. Indian physicists freely draw their tools of investigation and analysis from the common pool, and when one of them formulates a general rule or principle, such as the Saha equation or the Chandrasekhar limit, he takes it for granted that it will be used by physicists everywhere and not just in India. The utility of a common stock of tools is not in question in the natural sciences; but in the human sciences, its very existence is in question.

No approach or method in any intellectual discipline can be satisfactory in every respect. The urge for continuous revision and reformulation of existing concepts, methods and theories is what gives to scientific enquiry its distinctive orientation. There is a difference, however, between the piecemeal revision and reformulation that is a part of everyday scientific practice and the call to set aside the entire stock of existing tools in order to start with a whole new orientation and approach. There can be several critiques

of the existing and established framework of enquiry, and several proposals for alternatives to it. Here I shall examine that kind of radical critique which is directed against alien approaches to the study of Indian society, and in the concluding part attempt an appraisal of the underlying promise of an alternative sociology more in tune with the Indian tradition.

Before proceeding further with questions of method, I would like to survey briefly some of the main substantive issues. Tradition has been viewed as an attribute of types of action and of authority, of institutions and of whole societies. It has been viewed positively as ensuring stability and continuity in society and culture, and negatively as providing resistance to development and change. The concepts of tradition used by sociologists are shaped by their theories of social structure and social change, but those theories are more often implicit than explicit.

In a study of the subject published some time ago, the sociologist Edward Shils (1981) drew attention to the lack of any systematic discussion of the concept even among its habitual users. If it is a characteristic of tradition that it is largely taken for granted by those who are in its grip, it may be said that the concept of it too has been more generally accepted as given than critically examined, at least by sociologists in the last fifty years. Significantly, that period witnessed the rise and fall of the dichotomous division of the world into societies labelled 'traditional' and 'modern'.

Tradition is, or at least was until recently, an important subject in the study of history, particularly the history of ideas and the history of art. Students of art and literature have always had to deal with the relationship between tradition and individual talent. More recently, those dealing with the history and sociology of science have drawn attention to the important part played by tradition in the development of scientific research. In neither art nor science is it reasonable to view tradition as simply an obstacle to creativity and innovation. Today, few scientists can hope to contribute effectively to science without being socialized into the traditions of the laboratory, and paradoxically this appears to be truer of scientific work at the end of the twentieth century than it was at the end of the eighteenth.

In its broadest usage, the idea of tradition is almost coterminous with that of culture which, in Tylor's famous definition, is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Beattie 1964: 20). Tradition, like culture, is both a facility and a constraint; it provides the individual with resources he would be incapable of creating by his own unaided effort, but it also confines his actions within a given framework of rules and practices. Both refer to things that exist independently of their individual bearers and outlive the individuals through whom they are transmitted from generation to generation. In both cases, the attention is on the past in the present.

What distinguishes tradition in the specific sense from culture in general is its conscious, not to say self-conscious, orientation to the past. The past is valued for its own sake and is invoked as a model for present practice. As Edward Shils has put it, 'Recurrence or identity through time is not, as such, the decisive criterion of traditional belief or action. It is not the intertemporal identity of beliefs or actions which constitutes a tradition; it is the intertemporal *filiation* of beliefs which is constitutive' (Shils 1975: 187, emphasis in original). Tradition is not simply the 'dead hand of custom'; traditions are consciously maintained, revived and even invented.

Nevertheless, tradition is not all that there is to social practice. A large part of the inspiration for the study of tradition in contemporary sociology derives, directly or indirectly, from the work of Max Weber. There it figures as only one of the components of social life, and not necessarily the most important one.

Weber's general sociology begins with a consideration of the nature and types of social action. As is well known, there are, according to him, three main types of action, defined in terms of their orientation. These are, traditional action, effectual or emotional action, and rational action. Weber's emphasis is by conscious choice on rational action rather than the two other types of action. As such, rational action is itself differentiated into two important sub-types, namely, instrumentally rational (Zweckrational) and value-rational (Wertrational) action. The author's intention was to formulate as sharply as possible the contrasts between the types of action: they were, in his scheme, ideal or pure types, and not average types.

The treatment of the pure type of traditional action is sketchy, not to say casual. Traditional action serves (along with **effectual** action) as a foil for setting off the distinctive features of rational action, particularly **instrumentally-rational** action. It is described as being governed by 'the habituation of long practice', and to that extent appears as unreflective. Weber realizes that by stressing the habits of the past, he pushes traditional action to the borderline between meaningful action and mere behaviour. As he puts it, 'Strictly traditional behaviour, like the reactive type of imitation discussed above, lies very close to the borderline of what can justifiably be called meaningfully oriented action, and often on the other side' (Weber 1978: 25). As we have seen, to be oriented towards a tradition is not necessarily to be ruled by the dead hand of custom.

Weber sees that there is at the other end too an affinity between traditional action and action that is rationally oriented towards an absolute value, in other words, value-rational action. As he points out, 'attachment to habitual forms can be upheld with varying degrees of self-consciousness and in a variety of senses. In this case the type may shade into value rationality (Wertrationalitat)' (Ibid). The willed and conscious revival, not to say invention, of tradition by a religious or political movement need not be more mechanical or unreflective than **the** routine of everyday practice in a scientific laboratory. It will be hard indeed to argue that people can never act within the framework of tradition in a rational way.

It should be obvious that most ongoing social arrangements **manifest** actions of all the principal types, ranging from the purely habitual to the purely calculative. This makes it difficult to move directly from the types of social action to the types of institutional arrangement. The latter show a mixture of components and can be distinguished **from** each other at best only in terms **of** the degrees to which the basic components are present. We get a clearer insight into the place of tradition in social arrangements through a consideration of the nature and types of legitimate domination. Weber repeatedly drew attention to the distinction between traditional and modern law, between the traditional state and the constitutional state, and above all between traditional and rational-legal principles of administration. There is a significant difference between institutions that have existed since time immemorial and derive their legitimacy from their antiquity and those that are created, modified and reconstituted by human beings in a deliberate and methodical manner. The continuous effort to improve upon existing social arrangements and to create new ones is a specific feature of the modern as against the traditional orientation to life. In India, the constitutional state is the prime exemplar of the departure from all traditional forms of governance.

Crucial to the continuity of any kind of social arrangement is its legitimacy. The sources

of legitimacy are diverse and they combine in various ways to provide different kinds of unity and coherence to particular social arrangements. Here there is a striking contrast between traditional and rational-legal forms of legitimacy. As Weber puts it, 'The validity of a social order by virtue of the sacredness of tradition is the oldest and most universal type of legitimacy'. And again, 'Today the most common form of legitimacy is the belief in legality, the compliance with enactments which are *formally* correct and which have been made in the accustomed manner' (Weber 1978: 37).

An examination of contemporary Indian society — as of any large and complex society today — reveals the coexistence of a great variety of institutional arrangements. In addition to the institutions of kinship, caste and religion inherited from the past, there are many new ones devoted to a variety of specialized tasks in the fields of administration, finance, health, education, communication, research, and so on. These modern institutions are open and secular institutions, and they provide indispensable linkages between the citizen and the state. The success of civil society in India will depend to a large extent on the health and well-being of these new open and secular institutions (Beteille 1996).

Modern institutions such as hospitals, laboratories and universities differ in form and function from the traditional institutions of village, caste and joint family. Their principles of recruitment are different and the rules for their internal regulation are also different. As a social arrangement, an institution has not only a certain form and function, but also a certain legitimacy and meaning for its individual members. Its form and function are what may be observed from outside; but viewed from within and by its members, what count for as much, if not more, are its meaning and legitimacy.

Today, there is much disquiet about the health and well-being of the modern institutions on which much of our public life depends. In their outward form they resemble similar institutions that work successfully, or more or less successfully, in the western world. Fifty years ago, it was believed that they would work successfully here as well once their teething troubles were over. But in many respects, these institutions — municipal corporations, universities, public hospitals, political parties, and so on — are in worse shape than they were fifty years ago. For, irrespective of their outward form, they have failed to maintain among their members the meaning and legitimacy indispensable for their effective functioning. The norms by which their activities are expected to be regulated yield too readily before the many traditional values that seep into them from the outer environment and disrupt their internal life.

There are those who say that our public institutions — legislatures, municipal corporations, political parties, universities and colleges — do not work well and indeed cannot work well on our soil because they are all alien to the Indian tradition and hence should be replaced by alternative institutions that are more in tune with that tradition. But the appeal to tradition as a guide for building alternatives to existing institutions, whether in administration or commerce or even education, has hardly led to any concrete results. So far it has been more a matter of rhetoric than of sober consideration of available alternatives. Open and secular institutions are an innovation of the modern world, and it is difficult to see how we can dispense with them on the ground that they are out of tune with traditional values. Once we accept the ideal of the constitutional state and the principle of equal citizenship for all irrespective of caste, creed and gender, certain traditional options become automatically closed.

What has been said above should not be taken to mean that all the institutions of modern India, or of any modern society, **must** be cast in one and the same mould. To say that our public institutions should by and large be open and secular institutions in contrast to what largely prevailed in the past is not to propose that religion, family and kinship should be

abolished or deprived of their legitimacy. It is obvious that institutions that have **little** to do with instrumental rationality have an important place not only in Indian society but in all human societies. Moreover, in western countries, institutions such as the English universities have retained many traditional components while adapting themselves successfully to changing legal, economic, and political requirements.

Enough has been said to show that traditional and other components of social action and social relations are closely intertwined in most if not all human societies. The construction and use of ideal types helps to sort these components out from each other, but only upto a point. Beyond that point the use of contrastive categories becomes misleading and counterproductive. It is one thing to construct ideal types of social action or social relations or even social institutions, but quite another to apply ideal types for contrasting whole societies and even whole continents.

With the beginning of the process of decolonization about fifty years ago, the relationship between tradition and modernity acquired a new focus in sociological enquiry. The examination of that relationship was seen to have both a theoretical and a practical value. The societies of Asia and Africa were all seen to be traditional societies and those of western Europe and northern America as modern ones. Tradition became an important topic, and for some time the most important one, in sociological studies of Turkey, Iran, India, and other countries in Asia and Africa. It figured hardly at all in studies of contemporary France, Germany, and the United States, and it is in this light that we have to view Shils's disquiet over the absence of any serious discussion of the concept in the sociological literature. For a certain period of time sociologists and other social scientists came to view tradition not as something to take pride in but as something to be got rid of in the interest of modernity and modernization.

A landmark in this new perspective on traditional societies was a joint project of the MIT and Columbia University for the study of a number of countries in the Middle East including Turkey, Iran and Egypt. The results of the study were published in an influential book by Daniel Lerner entitled *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Lerner (1958: 83) observed, 'The direction of change is the same in all the Middle East lands. Everywhere the passing of traditional life-ways is visible; the secular trend is toward mobility — physical, social and psychic mobility'. He dwelt in particular on the emergence of a new personality type and the part played in it by education, communication and the media.

The churning process observed — and welcomed — by Lerner and his associates in the Middle East was taking place elsewhere as well. In India in the wake of independence there was a marked enthusiasm for the transformation of society through rational legislative enactment and rational economic planning. Economic development was seen as the necessary precondition of every kind of desirable change. A major concern among all social scientists, and not economists alone, was with achieving faster rates of growth. This concern made traditional habits, practices and attitudes a major target of attack. Tradition was viewed as the source and foundation of underdevelopment, and modernization was advocated in the name of both economic growth and social justice.

The negative attitude towards tradition encouraged by theories of modernization did not go unchallenged and it did not last very long. For one thing, modernity and modernization came under increasingly critical scrutiny. The actual experience of modernization gave people a better sense of its social and human costs than they at first had. Moreover, the United States, the prime exemplar of modernity, rapidly lost its glamour in the eyes of the intelligentsia throughout Asia and Africa. The journey to modernity seemed excessively arduous, and what lay at the end of it was both uncertain

and uninspiring. The abandonment of tradition lock, stock and barrel seemed too high a price to pay for such a venture. The attention soon shifted from tradition as an obstacle to modernity to tradition as a guarantor of national identity.

The noisy disparagement of tradition as a source merely of obstacles to the realization of a better and fuller life can hardly be regarded as reasonable. At the same time, the obsession with national tradition as the only guarantor of a meaningful social existence is not without its costs. In what follows I shall examine some of the hazards that accompany the attempt to mobilize national tradition in the service of sociological enquiry.

Sociology has been practised in India for not more than seventy to seventy-five years, but then, as I have already pointed out, as an academic discipline, it is hardly more than a hundred years old anywhere. We are dealing with a relatively new discipline that in fact entered our academic practice not very long after it first became established in the west. To be sure, the real expansion of the discipline took place only after independence. Today, it is not only taught in a large number of colleges and universities, but has found a place in institutes of research outside the university system. It has its own professional associations, national and regional, and its own professional journals. The volume of research and publication in the subject is now not inconsiderable.

There are two sides to sociology as a discipline which we may describe for short as the empirical and the theoretical sides, including in the latter not just theories in the strict sense but also approaches, methods, concepts, procedures and techniques. Ideally speaking, the two sides should grow together and roughly at the same pace. But when we look at the actual development of sociology, we find that Indian sociologists have produced a very large body of empirical material, sometimes very competently analysed and interpreted, on virtually every aspect of their society; but there has been very little innovation by them of concepts, methods, and theories. For the latter, they have relied by and large on the stock of ideas produced by sociologists in Europe and America for the common use of all.

People point out that there is a French, a German, and even an American tradition of sociology, and ask why there is no corresponding Indian tradition. Several questions arise out of this. Is it necessary for every nation to have its own tradition of sociology? Are national traditions the only significant ones in all fields of intellectual endeavour? And finally, if a national tradition has not emerged on its own, what should be done, and by whom, to bring it into being?

The question still remains as to why Indian sociologists have shown so little innovation in the practice of their discipline. Many would say that this is because they have depended too heavily on borrowed theories, borrowed concepts, and borrowed methods of enquiry. The practice began as a matter of convenience, and then became established in the routines of teaching and research so that now it has become difficult to dislodge. When the social sciences began to be taught in our universities, there were very few books written by Indian scholars who depended by and large on books written in the west. The practice continues to this day, and it affects not only the content of teaching but also the nature and direction of research.

It is not easy to set oneself free from habits of the mind that have become established over several generations through continuous practice. Some years ago, a distinguished Indian economist complained about the demoralizing effects of the dependence on western text-books and more generally of the preoccupation with catching up with the

west (Chakravarty 1986). The same kind of complaint is persistently made by Indian sociologists about the work of their colleagues. It is not that Indian social scientists have never tried to write their own text-books. But these are for the most part either unabashed imitations of western products, or they are of very poor quality. Finding little to choose between them, most sociologists who are serious about teaching and research return sooner or later to the mainstream of their discipline.

Most working sociologists in India, as elsewhere, act in the implicit belief that their work moves forward mainly through borrowing and creative adaptation. After all, what we call western sociology is not all of one piece, and American sociology, which is in the ascendant today, would not be what it is but for extensive borrowing from French and German sociology. Perhaps the majority believe that we should use such tools as are already available, adapt them to our uses as well as we can, and improvise to the extent possible. Whether we engage in participant-observation or in survey research, the basic procedures have to be broadly the same, so why should we agonize over where and by whom they were first devised? A large body of concepts and methods, suited to a variety of tastes, is already available for the study of virtually every substantive problem, and the principle of economy demands that we first try out what is available.

But the discontent with the passive and dependent status of Indian social science is not easily removed. Critics of the existing state of affairs argue that the poverty of our social theory follows from our own unreflective adherence to a framework of enquiry and analysis that is alien in origin and inappropriate to our needs. Working within the framework leads to its further entrenchment and to a continuing dissipation of intellectual energy. They point out that the analogy between the natural sciences and the human sciences is misconceived and misleading. In the latter, there is far greater risk of even observation and description being vitiated by **the** use of concepts and procedures that have emerged in response to a different and alien cultural and historical tradition.

If we set aside the existing framework of sociology used more or less throughout the world on the ground that it is of alien provenance and hence out of tune with the Indian reality, what shall we put in its place? The prospect of an alternative sociology of India or even an alternative to the sociology of India has attracted some scholars almost from the time when the subject was introduced into India. Among the early exponents of the view were Benoy Kumar Sarkar in Calcutta and D.P. **Mukherji** in Lucknow each of whom had a considerable following in his lifetime (Bhattacharyya 1990; Madan 1994).

In his presidential address to the Indian Sociological Conference in 1955, D.P. Mukherji took issue with his colleagues for their abject dependence on imported knowledge. 'It pains me to observe', he said, 'how our Indian scholars succumb to the lure of modern 'scientific' techniques imported from outside as a part of technical aid and 'know-how', without resistance and dignity'. He wished Indian sociologists to take greater pride in their own tradition. 'Thus it is that it is not enough for the Indian sociologist to be a sociologist. He must be an Indian first, that is, he is to share in the folk-ways, mores, customs and traditions for the purpose of understanding his social system and what lies beneath it and beyond it' (Mukerji 1958: 232-3). Few Indians can resist the appeal to national dignity when it is made at a public gathering.

Professor Mukerji (1958: 233) spoke about the kind of since the late sixties set aside space for a discussion under the general rubric 'For a Sociology of India'. Some of India's ablest sociologists have contributed notes towards the discussion. Their observations have pointed to the merits and defects of a variety of positions: interpretative as compared to positivist approaches; insiders' versus outsiders' perspectives; national self-reliance as against reliance on an international community of

scholars; and so on. But while a number of interesting insights have emerged, usually as byproducts, so far as the present question is concerned, the debate has shown hardly any forward movement in the last thirty years.

The point around which the debate seems to turn is that of the penetrability of particular traditions to general methods of social enquiry. Some would say that such methods cannot reach into the inner core of meaning constitutive of every tradition, and others that they can, at least in principle. The issue is not of the complete adequacy of the general methods at present available, but of the possibility of making such methods more adequate through comparative study. Here I would place the greatest emphasis on the role of fair and objective comparisons, for I believe, with Durkheim, that comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology, it is sociology itself.

The obdurate fact about the world in which we live is that there are very many, and not just two or three, national traditions. The promise of comparative sociology, which it has fulfilled in some measure though by no means in full measure, is that it will enable us to detach ourselves, at least to some extent, from these particular traditions in order to reach towards a general understanding of social action, social relations and social institutions in their entire range and variety. How can we move forward if we turn our backs on what has been done so far on the ground that the whole framework of enquiry was alien and hence distorting, and that we will be better served by our own particular sociology? Why should the clock stop with the inception of an Indian sociology, and other people elsewhere not set about developing a Korean sociology, an Indonesian sociology, a Turkish sociology, a Nigerian sociology, and a Peruvian sociology?

The matter will not rest there, for if we examine it a little more closely, we will encounter the same problem of the plurality of traditions within India. Even if we begin by speaking of one single Indian tradition, there is no reason why everyone should stop there. Within India there is a Hindu tradition and an Islamic tradition; north Indian and south Indian languages and traditions; and numerous sub-traditions within and outside these. When people speak of the replacement of the alien western framework of enquiry by one more in tune with the Indian tradition, they almost invariably have in mind the Brahminical Hindu tradition, although only some make this explicit and others do not. The plea for recasting the categories of sociological enquiry from English into Sanskrit is symptomatic of this.

I am yet to see a proposal for an Indian alternative to the existing framework of sociological enquiry presented through categories other than those of Brahminical Hinduism. To be sure, "what prevails today as the framework of general and comparative sociology is not free from its own biases, its own distortions and its own constraints. But not all Indians may feel the same enthusiasm for having those constraints replaced by the constraints of Sanskritic Hindu categories. Many if not most of them are likely to find more room for intellectual maneuver in the former than in the latter.

The bias for the categories of Brahminical Hinduism is most explicit in the approach to sociology advocated by Kewal Motwani, a contemporary of Benoy Sarkar and D.P. Mukerji, though perhaps never as influential as them. Professor Motwani (1961: 19) maintained that Dharma Shastra was the Sanskrit word for sociology. The sociology that he recommended was to be based on the Dharmashastra in general and the Manu Dharmashastra in particular (Motwani 1934, 1961). His views were apparently well received abroad and by some scientists in India in the forties and fifties (Hallen and Prasad 1970). But we can well imagine how this presentation of Indian sociology as Manuvad is likely to be received today by those who speak for the Backward Classes. Professor Motwani published a very great deal, and his arguments have a peculiar

insistence and consistency. It is not necessary to decide whether he should be blamed for being ingenuous or praised for being candid. His work has an exemplary value if only because it brings fully into view the biases that other proponents of an Indian alternative to mainstream sociology can only mask but never really escape.

The search for an Indian way of doing sociology appears on balance to be both half-hearted and disingenuous. I call it half-hearted because the intention, though never abandoned, has not led to any cumulative progression of effort. In terms of the development of an alternative framework for the sociology of India, we are no further today than we were in the thirties and forties with B.K. Sarkar and D.P. Mukerji. People speak at conferences and write the occasional paper about an Indian approach to the sociology of India, but then they seem to lose concentration and go about their work in much the same way as the others do. What we have as a result is a completely static dialectic in which the same or similar formulas are repeated without any forward movement. If it is generally true that every Indian sociologist begins as if there has been no work done by Indians before, this is particularly true of those who set out to take the Indian tradition as their point of departure.

This is accompanied by an orientation to tradition that places it not only in the past, but by preference in the distant and remote past. Some refer back to Manu and others to Panini, but few care for their immediate predecessors who we may assume to have been closer to them in outlook and sensibility. There is a large and yawning gap in time and context between the tradition that is invoked and the purpose for which it is invoked, rendering largely fictitious that sense of filiation which is an essential part of tradition as an active principle. The desire to connect with the remote past without any regard for the nearer links of filiation hardly betokens a sincere engagement with tradition. It is obvious that the appeal to tradition serves a rhetorical purpose; but it is doubtful that it contributes anything of value to the method of sociological enquiry.

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