

CHAPTER I

SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA : AN APPROACH

OUR OBJECTIVE IS to evaluate the existing concepts and propositions about social change in contemporary Indian society. We intend to show how either due to a partial focus on the social processes in India, or due to the limitations of the analytical categories used by individual sociologists, treatment of change in India remains narrow and inadequate. We suggest some major reformulations in these conceptual categories which are theoretically consistent and might also lead to a comprehensive understanding of the Indian processes of social change. These categories are represented in a paradigmatic form for clarity and precision in the final section of this chapter.

SOCIAL CHANGE AS IDEOLOGY

The study of social change, in view of the nebulous nature of its theory is a difficult task, and it is more difficult in the case of a society like India which has not only a fathomless historical depth and plurality of traditions but is also engulfed in a movement of nationalistic aspirations under which concepts of change and modernization are loaded with ideological meanings. In this form, change ceases to be viewed as a normal social process; it is transformed into an ideology, that change is in itself desirable and must be sought for.¹

This introduces non-scientific elements in the evaluation of social change in India, elements of which are found in many studies. Authors of these studies evaluate change or non-change in India from their own moral or ideological view-points. With varying emphasis, these writers accept the desirability of change for the sake of change. Some of them assume prophetic aura,² others express dismay at the slow change,³ and still others postulate quasi-deterministic interpretations about Indian phenomenon of change.⁴

The same tendency is manifest when change is treated by some social scientists as equivalent to 'development' and 'progress'. "This," Dumont says, "amounts to the justification of the social order being found not in what it is, but in what it is supposedly becoming. . . . in such circumstances a great and increasing social pressure is brought upon those who in the public estimation should know about social change."⁵

The ideological orientation, however, is not only confined to the formulation of the goals of social change, but also extends to the specific form the sociological categories should have to analyse change. To achieve this goal

a case for the development of a particularistic or typical Indian sociology is made. Its proponents admit, however, that sociological explanations involve some form of intellection which is universalistic, call it 'sociological apperception',⁶ 'empathy',⁷ or 'sociological imagination',⁸ but simultaneously they also hold that explanation of specific forms of change in the cultural context of a nation requires delineation of conceptual categories applicable only to that particular culture. Hence, they claim there should be an *Indian* sociology distinct from sociology in the West or in other parts of the world. This particularism of some Indian sociologists introduces yet another ideological element in the analysis of change.

This tendency owes its origin particularly to the reaction of Indian sociologists to the ethnocentric formulation of the theories of social evolution propounded during the 19th century.⁹ In part, it also reflects the intellectual orientation of some sociologists which is humanistic and non-empirical, and as a safeguard for this which favours sociological particularism on the one hand, and, on the other, attempts to accord sociology the status of a metaphysical and historical-speculative discipline in conformity with Indian tradition. The fact is, however, overlooked that even the Western sociology has a tradition of anti-positivism, and on this basis alone the case for Indian sociology cannot be defended. Obviously, a part of such reasoning is an outcome of the 'identity crisis' among the intellectuals and elite of the new nations.¹⁰ To some extent it may also be a reflection of the way Indian politico-economic and cultural factors impinge upon the thinking of Indian sociologists... a problem which is relevant to sociology of knowledge.¹¹

This orientation of Indian sociologists, however, is not entirely ideological. Quite a good deal of it also results from conceptual ambiguities common to sociology in general. For instance, some Indian sociologists object to a definition of social system which says: "(Social System) consists of a plurality of individual actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the optimization of gratification."¹² Their view is that Indian social system traditionally organized on caste lines idealized the value of 'self-denial', hierarchy and moral obligation (*dharma*) rather than 'optimization of gratification'. Such a notion of social system is derived from an individualistic frame of reference which did not apply to the Indian situation.

A closer scrutiny of the above will, however, reveal the way ideological elements are implicit in the arguments. Emphasis on the uniqueness of Indian society emerges from a confusion of levels between the raw data of sociology, such as the specific values, institutions, customs and cultural forms and its conceptual abstractions which constitute the basis of sociological categories. It is overlooked that 'society' or social structure as concepts are higher-level abstractions over culture.¹³ A logical corollary of this view-point is the rejection of sociology for culturology,¹⁴ or probably for a series of culturologies, each based on different sets of ideological commitments.¹⁵ Moreover, the claim for an Indian sociology is not entirely based on a humanistic methodological tradition which, as we mentioned above,

also exists in the West;¹⁶ its roots lie rather in the ideology of nationalism.

A comparative study of institutions is a prerequisite for analysis of social change which is not possible through a culturological approach to sociology as it overemphasizes the uniqueness of social phenomenon. For instance, how could the concept 'modernization' be explained from a purely Indological frame of reference? How could one explain the changes in the social structure of the Indian society, in the spheres of family, caste, civic and community administration and bureaucracy, without analysing the significance of new heterogenetic developments in law, constitutional rights, bureaucracy, science and technology?

Yet, none could deny that Indian cultural tradition is unique. But uniqueness is a common and simple fact of life; every concrete event in temporal sense is unique. Uniqueness is only one facet of reality; its other facet comprises function. . . . the way social realities interact and are related to one another. A study of the latter aspect necessitates comparison which is impossible without conceptual abstraction. These abstractions form a hierarchical order, and through them the sociologist translates 'the language of the sources', to borrow a term from Hans L. Zetterberg, into the language of sociology. The sociologist not only takes note of the concrete individualities of social events and forms, but also translates them into higher-order abstractions for comparison.

It is probably in this sense that Louis Dumont, who otherwise takes a culturological or, in his own words, "ideo-structural approach to Indian sociology, is able to arrive at the functional equivalent of the (Western idea of the) individual" in the Indian institution of caste.¹⁷ He writes:

Terms like 'individualism', 'atomism', 'secularism' are often used to oppose modern society to societies of the traditional type. In particular, the contrast between caste society and its modern counterpart is a commonplace. Liberty and equality on the one hand, interdependence and hierarchy on the other, are in the foreground. Permanence versus mobility, ascription versus achievement allow for a neat contrariety between the two kinds of social system. We might well ask whether there was as much difference in social practice here and there, as between (explicit or implicit) social theories, and I shall point out that Western society is no stranger to the attitudes and even to the ideas which caste society upholds. . . . To return to our comparison, we may say that the individual, in so far as he is the main bearer of the values in the modern society, is equivalent to order, or *dharma* in classical Hindu society. . . . modern society has evolved from that of the Middle Ages, which certainly at first sight appears to be a society of the traditional type, more like the Indian than like the modern. . . . The conception of the *Universitas*, i.e. of the social body as a whole of which living men are merely the parts, obviously belongs to the traditional conceptions of society and in particular is akin to the Hindu conception of *dharma* and the hierarchical interdependence of the several social statuses.¹⁸

This implies that many elements of the Indian culture, which for the lack of methodological clarity are treated as unique, can with facility be analysed in terms of higher levels of abstractions without, however, distorting their distinctiveness as cultural symbols. Could we not, for instance, offer a functional equivalent of *dharma* as normative order, of *karma* as personal moral commitment, of *jati* or caste as hierarchical principle of stratification? About caste, substantial comparative study has already been conducted to show how its structural counterparts are found even outside the Indian tradition.¹⁹

Disciplinary isolationism is, moreover, contrary to the tendency in social sciences to come together. This, however, proceeds side by side with the process of internal differentiation in the fields of individual disciplines. A number of noted sociologists including Raymond Aron²⁰ and Edward E. Shils²¹ have acknowledged this process. In this light the claim for an Indian sociology appears somewhat anachronistic.

Another bias in the studies of social change in India results from too much concern with culture and values. Structural realities are often ignored and studies suffer from 'value bias', as it were. Most studies are focused on acculturation, diffusion of norms and values; change is identified with 'spread' of these values in regional or national spheres. The reason for this is mainly historical. Both the British and French social scientists who first conducted sociological studies in India were more interested in the ethnography of caste,²² custom and culture and they studied these phenomena from a descriptive or functional model. Studies employing a dialectical or conflict model have been fewer indeed.²³

The distinction between the functional and the dialectical models is too well-known to merit repetition. Functionalism assumes that "society is a relatively persisting configuration of elements" and consensus is an ubiquitous element of the social system. The dialectical model, on the contrary, treats 'change'²⁴ or 'tension'²⁵ to be ubiquitous in society. Since functionalism assumes social systems to be in a state of value consensus, it relegates the role of power in social relations to a secondary place; dialectical model, on the other hand, presupposes that value conflict is a universal reality of any stratified social structure. Functionalism treats change as a slow, cumulative process of adjustment to new situations. Dialectical model holds that most changes are revolutionary in significance and effect qualitative transformation in the social structure. According to functionalism, changes constantly take place in social systems through internal growth and adjustment with forces from without; in dialectical model, major sources of change are immanent in the system itself.

For ideological reasons, differences between these two models are exaggerated when in reality they have many common elements. The dichotomy between consensus and conflict which is often used to counterpose the two models is, however, not absolute. Not only consensus but also conflict has system-integrative functions as noted by many sociologists.²⁶ Moreover,

both models take an evolutionary view of change and, in some respects, both are based on an equilibrium model of society.

It is a curious fact, however, that Indian sociologists who voice the need for a typical Indian sociology also identify themselves methodologically either with dialectical or functional approaches. This shows not only the extent of ambiguity but also conflict in the thinking of these sociologists. Some illustrations of this we may find in their conceptual approaches to the study of social change in India.

CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA

Some major concepts and approaches about social change in India can be grouped as: (i) Sanskritization and Westernization; (ii) Little and Great traditions consisting of (a) processes of parochialization and universalization, and (b) cultural performances and organization of tradition; (iii) multiple traditions; (iv) structural approach, based on (a) functional model, and (b) dialectical model; and (v) cognitive historical or Indological approach. We shall briefly review each of them to find common grounds for a conceptual integration and also to show the biases and limitations from which they suffer.

Sanskritization and Westernization

The term Sanskritization was used first by M.N. Srinivas to describe the process of cultural mobility in the traditional social structure of India. In his study of the Coorgs in Mysore he found that lower castes, in order to raise their position in the caste hierarchy, adopted some customs of the Brahmins and gave up some of their own, considered to be impure by the higher castes. For instance, they gave up meat-eating, consumption of liquor and animal sacrifice to their deities; they imitated the Brahmins in matters of dress, food and rituals. By doing this, within a generation or so they could claim higher positions in the hierarchy of castes. To denote this process of mobility Srinivas first used the term 'Brahmanization'. Later on, he replaced it by Sanskritization.

Sanskritization is a much broader concept than Brahmanization. Srinivas realized that the process which motivated the lower castes to imitate the customs of the Brahmins in Mysore was a specific case of a general tendency among the lower castes to imitate the cultural ways of the higher castes; in many cases these higher castes were non-Brahmins; they were Kshatriyas, Jats, Vaisyas, etc. in various regions of the country. The crucial idea, however, is that of hierarchy in the caste system theoretically represented by *Varna*. There are four *Varnas*, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra in the same hierarchical order, and all individual castes or subcastes, with the exception of the untouchables, can be classified on the basis of *Varna* into a hierarchical order. The untouchables have traditionally

been outside the Varna hierarchy and form the lowest rung of the caste stratification. The Brahmins, who constitute the top of the Varna hierarchy have since time immemorial enjoyed the most respectable position in the caste system. They form the priestly class, have the monopoly over the study and interpretation of the Hindu scriptures and sacred texts through institutionalized means.²⁷ As custodians of the Hindu tradition a stricter conformity with the ideal norms of Hinduism was expected from them; this expectation progressively became less and less strict for the castes lower down in the hierarchy until for the lower and untouchable castes the widest deviation from the ideal norms was tolerated.

Thus, in the social structure of the caste system the hierarchy of social positions coincided with the hierarchy of expectations about the conformity to ideal Hindu conduct-norms. Not only some form of deviance by the lower and untouchable castes from the sacred Hindu norms was tolerated but at one level their effort to follow the norms monopolized by the upper castes was stubbornly resisted. Status in caste being ascribed by birth, the chances of smooth mobility to high caste positions were more or less closed.

Despite this closure there have been changes in caste hierarchy and its norms from time to time. For instance, what was culturally accepted (Sanskritic) during the Vedic period of Hinduism was in some cases a taboo in the periods which followed. Vedic Hinduism was magico-animistic, Vedic Brahmins drank Soma (liquor), offered animal sacrifice and ate beef.²⁸ These were prohibited later and the only exception was made in cases of the lower and untouchable castes. The hierarchical principle, however, remained unchanged. It became rather stronger as with few exceptions the castes with ritual superiority had dominant economic and political positions.²⁹ This cemented the hierarchical foundation of the caste system.³⁰

Sanskritization is the process of cultural and social mobility during these periods of relative closure of the Hindu social system. It is an endogenous source of social change. From a social psychological point, Sanskritization is a culturally specific case of the universal motivation toward 'anticipatory socialization' to the culture of a higher group in the hope of gaining its status in future. The specific sense of Sanskritization lies in the historicity of its meaning based on the Hindu tradition. In this respect, Sanskritization is a unique historical expression of the general process of acculturation as a means of vertical mobility of groups.

Here, we must explain the two levels of meanings which are implicit in Sanskritization and which interchangeably have been made use of by Srinivas. We may call them 'historical specific' and 'contextual specific' connotations of Sanskritization. In historical specific sense Sanskritization refers to those processes in Indian history which led to changes in the status of various castes, its leadership or its cultural patterns in different periods of history. It is indicative of an endogenous source of social change in the broad historical spectrum of India. In contextual specific sense, however, Sanskritization denotes contemporaneous processes of cultural imitation of

upper castes by lower castes or subcastes, in different parts of India. The nature of this type of Sanskritization is by no means uniform as the content of cultural norms or customs being imitated may vary from Sanskritic or Hindu traditional forms to the tribal and even the Islamic patterns.

This is illustrated by the diversity of patterns found in the contextual process of Sanskritization. Studies show that at many places lower castes imitate the customs of the Kshatriyas and not of the Brahmins;³¹ at other places tribes are reported to imitate the customs of the caste Hindus;³² in a few exceptional cases even the higher castes have been found imitating the tribal ways or undergoing the process called 'tribalization'.³³ In other contexts, Muslim cultural style is found to set the limit for imitation by upper as well as the lower castes.³⁴ Islamic tradition being exogenous to the Hindu tradition, such forms of acculturation fall outside the scope of Sanskritization. Beyond this a process of cultural interaction between the Sanskritic and other orthogenetic traditions such as those of the lower castes and the tribes has always existed in India; this renders it difficult to define the exact nature of Sanskritization.

Consequently, Srinivas has been changing his definition of Sanskritization from time to time. Initially he defines it as the tendency among the low castes to move higher in the caste hierarchy "in a generation or two" by "adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon." He writes:

The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able in a generation or two to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization'...in preference to 'Brahmanization', as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other 'twice born' castes.³⁵

Here Sanskritization is identified with imitation of the Brahmanical customs and manners by the lower castes. Srinivas later re-defines Sanskritization as "a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or *other group*, changes its customs, ritual, *ideology*, and way of life in the direction of a *high*, frequently, 'twice born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community."³⁶ [italics added]. The new connotation of Sanskritization is evidently much broader; it is neither confined to Brahmins as a reference group nor to the imitation of

mere rituals and religious practices. It now also means imitation of ideologies, but it is not clear in what sense the term 'ideology' has been used. It could not be secular in meaning as in that case the distinction between Sanskritization and secularization (Westernization) would be blurred. Probably ideology refers to various thematic aspects of the Hindu tradition. Srinivas once wrote: "Sanskritization means not only the adoption of new customs and habits, but also exposure to new ideas and values, which have found frequent expression in the vast body of Sanskrit literature sacred as well as secular. *Karma*, *dharma*, *paapa*, *maya*, *samsara* and *moksha* are examples of some of the most common Sanskritic theological ideas, and when people become Sanskritized, these words occur frequently in their talk." Thus a distinction between the two aspects can be drawn.

There is, however, one major theoretical implication in the meaning of Sanskritization as an ideological borrowing process. It broadens the connotation of the term 'Sanskritic' to include both sacred and secular elements of culture. In fact, through Sanskritization, often only secular status symbols of the higher castes are imitated by the lower castes. In north-eastern U.P., for example, the lower castes have imitated not the rituals or sacred customs of the upper castes but their conspicuous style of consumption and living, such as betel-chewing, wearing of gold ornaments, shoes and other forms of dresses which were proscribed until the abolition of Zamindari.³⁷

Here the phenomena of economic and political domination assume great significance. This has been recognized by Srinivas, and he integrates the concept of Sanskritization with the phenomena of power and domination. He writes: "The mediation of the various models of Sanskritization through the local dominant caste stresses the importance of the latter in the process of cultural transmission. Thus, if the locally dominant caste is Brahmin or Lingayat, it will tend to transmit a Brahmanical model of Sanskritization, whereas if it is Rajput or Bania it will transmit Kshatriya or Vaishya model. Of course, each locally dominant caste has its own conception of Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya models."³⁸ This evidently shows that meaning or context of Sanskritization would not only differ in each model but also within the same model from region to region. This introduces contradictions in various 'contextual specific' connotations of Sanskritization besides those which might exist between the historical and contextual specific levels of this process.

There is also a problem in integrating the concept of dominance or power with the process of Sanskritization. The phenomenon of dominance introduces the structural element in the Sanskritization model of social change which is never fully made explicit by Srinivas. In this connexion he correlates the processes of caste mobility with the 'fluidity of the political system'³⁹ in India at various levels of political organization (imperial, secondary local,⁴⁰ or imperial regional provincial, village level⁴¹) and with the 'pre-British productive system'.⁴² Due to political fluidity, Srinivas

contends, many dominant castes in the past ascended to higher positions within the caste hierarchy either through royal decrees or through formation of autonomous political power. Historian K.M. Pannikar is even of the view that the Nandas were the last true Kshatriyas in India (fifth century B.C.), and since then all so-called Kshatriyas have come into being by usurpation of power by the lower castes and consequently the Kshatriya role and social position.⁴³

The process of Sanskritization mentioned above is a good example of the 'historical specific' usage of this term. It refers to succession or circulation of dominant groups in Indian history through rise and fall of power, through conflicts and war and through political stratagems. All these are illustrative of structural changes which a concept like Sanskritization does not connote fully. Moreover, this meaning of Sanskritization bears no logical relationship to 'contextual specific' connotation of this concept since Sanskritization in this sense does not lead to a real ascendance to a higher-caste status or to real power.

Westernization

Compared with Sanskritization, Westernization is a simpler concept. It is defined by Srinivas as "the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of over 150 years of British rule, the term subsuming changes occurring at different levels . . . technology, institutions, ideology and values."⁴⁴ Emphasis on humanitarianism and rationalism is a part of Westernization which led to a series of institutional and social reforms in India. Establishment of scientific, technological and educational institutions, rise of nationalism, new political culture and leadership in the country are all by-products of Westernization. According to Srinivas, the increase in Westernization does not retard the process of Sanskritization; both go on simultaneously, and to some extent, increase in Westernization accelerates the process of Sanskritization. For instance, the postal facilities, railways, buses and newspaper media which are the fruits of Western impact on India render more organized religious pilgrimages, meetings, caste solidarities etc. possible now than in the past.

Srinivas prefers the term Westernization to 'modernization'. He contends that modernization presupposes rationality of goals which in the ultimate analysis could not be taken for granted, since human ends are based on value preferences and "rationality could only be predicted of the means not of the ends of social action."⁴⁵ By Westernization he also means primarily the British impact which he admits is "historically untenable (yet) heuristically unavoidable".⁴⁵

Evidently, Sanskritization and Westernization as concepts are primarily focused to analyse cultural changes, and have no scope for systematic explanation of changes in the social structure. Srinivas concedes this point: 'To describe the social changes occurring in modern India in terms of Sanskritization and Westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural'

and not in structural terms. An analysis in terms of structure is much more difficult than an analysis in terms of culture."⁴⁵ He further adds that Sanskritization involves 'positional change' in the caste system without any structural change.⁴⁵

The questions, however, are: how far do Sanskritization and Westernization as concepts describe the ramifications of cultural change in India? Are the phenomena Sanskritization and Westernization inclusive enough to account for all the major cultural changes in India? The answers to these require a discussion of the concepts in two parts: first, in logical terms and second, in terms of contextual sufficiency.

Sanskritization and Westernization, in logical sense, are 'truth asserting' concepts which oscillate between the logics of ideal-typical and nominal definitions of phenomena.⁴⁶ Hence their connotation is often vague, especially as we move from one level of cultural reality (historical specific) to another (contextual specific). Srinivas himself says about Sanskritization that it "is an extremely complex and heterogeneous concept. It is even possible that it would be more profitable to treat it as a bundle of concepts than as a single concept. The important thing to remember is that it is only a name for a widespread cultural process."⁴⁷

The nominal nature of the concept is thus clearly evident. This is also why Sanskritization and Westernization fail to lead to a consistent theory of cultural change. Such consistency is far from realization since in Srinivas' own words, "the heterogeneity of the concept of Sanskritization. . . subsumes mutually antagonistic values, perhaps even as Westernization does".⁴⁷ Even otherwise, nominal definitions are devoid of theory. They contain no hypotheses, and in Zetterberg's words "cannot be true or false. They can be clumsy or elegant, appropriate or inappropriate, effective or worthless but never true or false."⁴⁸ Obviously, Sanskritization and Westernization are theoretically loose terms; but as truth-asserting concepts they have great appropriateness and viability.

Theoretical looseness of these concepts is evident also from the way scholars have interpreted them. E.B. Harper, for instance, treats Sanskritization as a functional concept distinct from a historical concept of change. Sanskritization, according to him, is an interpretative category to understand the relationship among the changing elements within the tradition than its historical reconstruction.⁴⁹ Contrary to this, J.F. Staal writes: "It should be clear that the concept of Sanskritization describes a process and is a concept of change. It is not a concept at which synchronic analysis could ever arrive in order to explain material obtained by synchronic analysis. Sanskritization is a meta-concept in this sense, and all historical concepts"⁵⁰ are meta-concepts in that they are based upon concepts of synchronic analysis. He further adds: "Sanskritization as used by Srinivas and other anthropologists is a complex concept or a class of concepts. The term itself seems to be misleading, since its relationship to the term Sanskrit is extremely complicated."