Sociology for India

R. N. SAKSENA*

Agra University, Agra, India

This paper does not aim at constructing any new concept or concepts in Sociology as a result of observance or analysis of the functioning of Indian society. Nor has any claim been made to develop a sociology which could in any way be different from sociology in the West; but an attempt has been made to explain and analyze the continuance of Indian society, one of the oldest societies in the world, and in this process to discover the continuance in our social existence. It is thought that such an approach might give us a deeper insight into the dynamics of Indian culture and possibly a new clue to the unity and functioning of a social system, which has remained more so in the realm of ideas rather than as a physical reality. For it may be said with some element of truth that till the establishment of the Republic of India there was not much in common in the Indian society, which according to Western thinking, could be either observed or experienced in a concrete shape so as to form a homogeneous social organisation, since India has been a land of diverse religious beliefs and practices, many languages and peoples of different races and ethnic origins. Yet the Indian people have always been conscious of the fact that they have a common social heritage, both in their thinking and living. As it has been repeatedly observed by the historians and other thinkers that there has always existed a fundamental unity amidst the diversities of our culture, if we look at Indian society as a whole. This unity has always existed in ideas and values. It gives us the proper material for observing Indian society in its correct sociological perspective, as a whole, by laying greater stress on unity in relations than in isolated elements. This approach has also an unique advantage of not only explaining the continuity of Indian society but also its vitality. Thus India's past is to be regarded as a key to India's present.

Dumont in his inaugural address, Chair of Sociology of India, in the "Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes" remarked:

"In our opinion, the first condition for a sound development of a Sociology of India is found in the establishment of the proper relation between it and classical Indology......... It should be obvious, in principle, that a Sociology of India lies at the confluence of Sociology and Indology."1 He further pointed out:

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1 Contributions to Indian Sociology, (Mouton) No. 1. p. 7.
“By putting ourselves in the school of Indology, we learn in the first place never to forget India is one. The very existence, and influence, of the traditional higher, sanskritic civilisation demonstrates without question the unity of India.”¹ For “unity is found here above all in ideas and values. It is, therefore, deeper and less easily defined: on the one hand it is social in the strictest sense, and this justifies our sociological perspective, it makes Indian society as a whole the true object of our study. On the other hand, this unity consists more in relations than in isolated elements.”² Dumont was fully justified in making these observations in spite of Bailey’s protest that the science of sociology applied equally to India as any other region, since the unique is “scientifically incomprehensible.”³ Bailey’s thinking is in keeping with the tradition of modern sociology which claims to deal only with “social facts” which have to be regarded as “things”. But a social phenomenon in one sense may be internal to one society while another phenomenon may provide it a cultural milieu and thus may be taken as external (to one society). In short, it is a matter of sociology of values. Thus, the values to be reckoned with are our primary object in a system of ideas. But a distinction may be drawn between facts of “representation” and facts of behaviour. For instance, the caste system includes both “ritual values” and “secular values”. Even Durkheim was led to believe that social facts are and are not things. Levi-Strauss has rightly recalled that for Durkheim they are both things and representations.⁴ However, Evans-Pritchard suggests a way out of this impasse. We can move from one point of view to the other through an effort of translation.⁵ In other words, we have to construct concepts which include both. For instance, the caste system becomes quite coherent in theory once we add to it all the implicit links that the people themselves give to it.

It is somewhat unfortunate that in spite of a rich intellectual tradition in the country, all our energies have been frittered away in commenting on what has been said in the past rather than analysing them with a view to determine their relevancy to the present situation. A sociological approach ought to be, in fact it finishes there, “when one has seen what it is that people believe and think, and who are the people who believe and think that.”⁶ I am conscious of the fact that in interpreting the ancient Indian thought in terms of the modern sociological thinking I run the risk of being dubbed as an acharya or pundit in the garb of a sociologist or even accused of superimposing Hindu social thought over secular values in a secular State. But it has to be recognised that the basis, as well as synthesis and unity of Indian culture are provided only by the ancient Hindu value-system and thought. I propose to revert to this point towards the end of this paper.

It is, therefore, obvious that spiritual values to us are not so much a form of

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¹ Ibid., p. 9.
² Ibid., p. 10.
³ Ibid., No. III, p. 88-61.
⁴ Levi-Strauss in Gurvitch and Moore, Twentieth Century Sociology, p. 528.
⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Social Anthropology, Ch. IV.
⁶ Quoted, Mauss, Contributions to Indian Sociology, No. 1, p. 13.