THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA: IMPERIALISM OR IRRELEVANCE?

In [1957], Louis Dumont and David Pocock published a manifesto in *The Contributions to Indian Sociology*, entitled “For a Sociology of India.” This manifesto attempted to lay the foundations for an adequate sociology of India. It stressed the importance of an “external point of view” and Indology to the construction of a sociology of India. Such a manifesto participated in the nationalist project of social science to produce knowledge adequate to, and in the service of, the nation-state. In a world of nation-states, the comparative project would consist of comparing like units, that is, nation-states, with each other, so that they could be ranked in some order, or their autonomous stories about development, sovereignty, etc. could be copied or shared by other nation-states. A sociology of India made “India” a distinctive location by tapping its deep history (“Indology”) at the same time that it made “India” available for comparison with “South Korea” and “Great Britain.”

The legacy of British colonialism on anthropological scholarship in India has been considerably more influential than post-war American scholarship. As Randeria says in her abstract, “the theme of American imperialism and hegemony in anthropological scholarship does not resonate in India in the same way as it does in Latin America or eastern/central Europe.” In the post-war period, US scholarship on India blossomed, funded by the Area Studies paradigms of the Cold War.

In the early years after Independence, there was a lot of excitement and interest about India in the U.S. Well-established and important social scientists such as Oscar Lewis went to India to contribute to the model of community development that was being espoused by Nehru. Oscar Lewis himself was part of a team of scholars invited to contribute to the Nehruvian project
of bringing about rapid growth in the countryside through projects of social engineering. Lewis came to India as a consultant to the Ministry of Community Development. Nehru’s hope was that institutional innovation in rural India would help bring about structural change that would prepare the ground for rapid economic growth by exerting democratic pressure for land redistribution. Nehru realized that radical land redistribution was not politically possible in the immediate post-Independence period within a democratic framework since landed elites controlled politics in the countryside, but he thought that if egalitarian and republican institutions found an institutional foothold, then the demand for rural equality would be unstoppable. It was in this context that American know-how in creating democratic institutions was being solicited by the Planning Commission.

However, like the good social scientists that they were, the American researchers first wanted to find out what existing structures of inequality were actually like before attempting to build new institutions for community development. A very interesting methodological innovation in this period, one that has not been successfully replicated since then, was the practice of team research. (This was not the only such team project undertaken in that period: the Harvard Chiapas project began in 1954). Under the direction of Maurice Opler, the India Program of Cornell University intensively studied the village of Senapur in U.P., out of which came many important works, including Bernard Cohn’s dissertation, *The Camars of Senapur: A Study of the Changing Status of a Depressed Caste* (1954).

Despite the importance of the work of a generation of US scholars trained in the postwar area studies rubric, some of whom learnt Indian languages as part of the War effort, the hold of US scholarship on Indian anthropology and sociology was never hegemonic. British social anthropology was more influential, but that was at least partly due to its greater success in
training Indian social anthropologists who then went on to do pioneering work on their own. In that period, Indian scholars in US institutions were fewer than in the traditional strongholds of Oxford and Cambridge, and many leading Indian scholars taught in the UK for brief periods before returning home. But even British scholarship on India never became hegemonic. If some body of literature did become hegemonic, it was Louis Dumont’s conceptualization of India’s caste hierarchies. This was an unlikely source of influence insofar as the French academy and French social thought had few connections to the Indian academic world. Of course, Durkheim’s influence was transmitted through British structural-functionalism, but there were few direct ties between French anthropology and Indian social anthropology, because of the weakness of institutional links and the lack of linguistic competence on both sides.

I will not attempt to provide a genealogy of the rise of caste as the scholarly key to Indian social organization – why and how it happened is a long story deserving its own intellectual historian. Let me simply observe some of its effects. Conceptualizing India as a “caste society” made it uniqueness and distinctiveness clear, but also resulted in exoticizing India, so that meaningful comparison with other nation-states proved impossible. There were no conceptual tools that could be used both to study India and other nation-states because none other possessed “caste” as a central social principle. There were attempts, for example, to compare caste with race, but no long-lasting and durable theory-building came out of those efforts. Caste made India exotic and exceptional, and this inhibited comparison, even with other postcolonial nation-states.

While India’s exceptional status may have impeded, but not completely stopped, some of the facile generalizations of modernization theorists, it also led to a preoccupation with caste that led intellectual energies away from other compelling concerns. If one compares the Latin American and Central American literature on peasants, for example, one finds much more
emphasis on the incorporation of these societies within broader, perhaps international, political structures. Although Marx could not be referred to in the US academy during McCarthyism, scholars such as Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz became some of the leading voices on the peasantry in Latin America. And, although the relationship between the village community and wider social structures was indeed very much on the table for American anthropologists studying India, the caste system provided an answer that obviated the need to look for other sources of inequality.

The focus on caste had other implications as well. Social anthropology in India focused on issues such as religion, kinship, and dowry and not directly on migration, urbanization, agricultural production, industrial and agricultural labor, malnutrition, poverty, and the state. One of the results of this was that economists working on agricultural production soon occupied the center of debates on peasants. It was economists in India who were at the center of debates about the mode of production in Indian agriculture, about the extraction and distribution of surplus, and about the relations between rural and urban populations, whereas it was anthropologists and sociologists who were primarily dealing with these issues in other parts of the world.

The preoccupation with caste also had the effect of isolating social anthropology within the Indian academy. The generally left-leaning culture of the Indian academy, steeped much more in the intellectual traditions of Marxism, was militantly anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) in Delhi was particularly steeped in Marxist thought, but nationalist historiography took a Marxist line on the extraction of surplus from India, and the anti-colonial currents of global Marxism found resonance in a number of disciplines. (It was said that whatever one’s degree in JNU, one always had a “hidden Master’s” in Soviet history, so essential was it to social life on the campus). Not all of the heavyweight intellectual traditions
were Marxist: of the three strongest disciplines in Indian social science -- history, economics, and social anthropology -- history leaned left most heavily, economics was split with the majority of economists doing neoclassical work, and social anthropology was furthest from Marxist ideas. However, Indian social anthropologists had to contend with the generally leftist milieu of academic life, and so people like Andre Beteille struggled to understand and define the relationship between class and caste in India. American scholars, steeped in the idiom of caste, had very little impact on this discussion about class and exploitation within India, and often found themselves politically marginal to the Indian academy.

In this regard, U.S. anthropologists were better off than their counterparts in political science, history, sociology, or other social science disciplines. For the gap in those disciplines between where the mainstream was in the US academy (resolutely non- or anti-marxist) and where it was in the Indian academy was too wide to be bridged. To be sure, U.S. academics in those disciplines continued to study India during the three decades from the mid-60s to the mid-80s, but they had little sustained dialogue with the main arguments in Indian academic life. U.S. anthropologists were better off because at least their Indian counterparts shared the conviction that caste was the most important topic to study, but as I outline below, there was little solidarity and much mutual suspicion.

It did not help that tensions between the US and India spilled over during the Vietnam War and Mrs. Gandhi’s rule. These tensions were to affect US scholars in profound ways, one of the most important of which was that it became extremely difficult to study certain subjects and even to get permission to go into rural areas. Mrs. Gandhi’s paranoia about espionage and foreign provocateurs (“the foreign hand” as it was called) spilled over into the way in which U.S. scholars were treated. Of course, after the revelations over Project Camelot, the fear that scholars
were actually spies was not unfounded. Its consequence, however, was to further distance U.S.
academics from scholarly life in India. Research visas became increasingly hard to obtain, and,
as a consequence, some scholars started doing research on short-term tourist visas, leaving India
every few months and re-entering on a new tourist visa.

Ideological differences and theoretical orientations created a fairly wide gulf between
U.S. and Indian scholars in the two decades starting from the mid-60s. The main debates that
raged in the pages of the Economic and Political Weekly, India’s pre-eminent social science
journal – about the role of the peasantry, about the mode of production in India, about peasant
movements in history, about the passive revolution and the Indian state – were largely ignored in
the U.S. academy.

Another area where state policy dramatically impacted scholarship was in the study of
democracy in India. When India became independent in 1947, it began a radical experiment in
participatory democracy. Only 18 years after the last group – women – were granted the suffrage
in Great Britain, India embarked on a project of universal suffrage. Nowhere else in the world
had democracy been tried when over half of the voting population was illiterate. U.S. scholars
were among the leading researchers investigating how participatory democracy actually
functioned at the grassroots. Anthropologists in particular were leading the way with studies of
leadership and voting in rural India. After Mrs. Gandhi’s relations with the U.S. soured, these
activities ground to a halt. Neither did Indian scholars take up the slack.

Now, we have a situation where participatory democracy has shaken the foundations of
dominance and rule in the countryside but we have no real understanding of how this has
happened and why. Political parties whose primary base is among lower-caste voters have shot
to prominence in north India, and have even held the reins of power in the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). But thanks to the fact that political anthropology has largely been dormant, we have little understanding of the process by which participatory democracy has finally metamorphosed into political empowerment of lower caste, lower class voters.

By and large, U.S. scholarship on India has failed to exercise either imperial domination or hegemony. One area where the failure of either U.S. anthropology or British social anthropology to influence Indian intellectual culture has had a negative impact is in traditions of fieldwork. The norm of one or more years living in “the field” has seldom been employed by social anthropologists in India, despite it being the method of early pioneers like M.N. Srinivas. This is partly because the funding agencies needed to support such projects were never created in India. But it is also because the social basis for the recruitment of Ph.D. students draws from the urban middle class. In the absence of cultures of camping and “roughing it,” this has meant that very few students have taken to doing long-term field research in sites where rural and tribal people dwell. This has meant a significant under-investment in field research even in the rural areas surrounding cities like Delhi, and a correspondingly thin base of data on which theories of social change in India can be constructed.