

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THE PROBLEM  
OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA\*

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INTRODUCTION

India's program of community development was launched in October, 1952. Today 5,195 "blocks" covering 99.5 per cent of the rural population have been established in every part of the country, and there is little doubt that the vast program has encouraged the stirrings of new life in rural India. The objectives of the community development program have been repeatedly clarified and the techniques for its implementation have been sharpened. Nevertheless, a major problem, that of communication between the administrators and their representatives and the people to whom developmental plans are directed, persists. It is the object of this paper to examine one aspect of this communication problem.

The community development program's purpose was no less than a rural revolution. The revolution was to be brought about not through coercion but through self-help and the participation of the people themselves-- it was to be a "silent revolution." The program's basis was the knowledge that the advancement of India's millions of villagers is imperative to the nation's social, political, and economic development.

"It was based on the knowledge that if the people have in the past seemed apathetic, or 'pathetically content' with poverty, it is because they were so long not permitted to participate in programs for their own advancement. It was based on the faith, already justified, that if they were given the opportunity for self-help they would respond with their skills, enthusiasm, and energies to achieve their own improvement. It was also based on the knowledge that no program for the advance of India's villages could succeed unless it had the wholehearted cooperation of the people themselves" (The Planning Commission 1958: 168-169).

The basis so outlined coincides with India's democratic underpinings and is realistic in reference to the magnitude of the problem community development in India faced in 1952 and continues to face, in large proportion, today. Without a program of self-help, any attempt to deal with the

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more than 80 per cent of India's population that lives in the villages would be doomed to failure. However, it is clear that the basis is totally unrealistic unless effective channels of communication exist and remain open between those who formulate the plans and those for whom they are formulated. Without an effective pattern of reciprocal communication between levels so identifiable neither the implementation nor the evaluation of program aspects is possible.

The gulf between the political and administrative leaders and the villagers in India is extraordinary and, perhaps, unequalled. This has made the problem of communication between the levels acute. In traditional and colonial India, any interaction that existed between the elites and the villagers pertained largely to the production of agricultural surpluses by the villagers and their distribution by the elites, in exchange for protection and miscellaneous services. Today--especially in relation to the self-help emphasis of planning India -- the minimal form of communication between the two general levels of society that existed in the past, is totally inadequate.

However, an adequate appreciation of the need to understand the significance of communication in implementing development programs has not yet been realized by program administrators (Taylor et al 1965: 540). Together with this, few studies of the communication process as it occurs between the major levels of Indian civilization have been made. True, there have been references in program formulations to the need for local agents of change and village level workers to "understand rural problems and the psychology of the farmer" and to "gain the confidence of the villager," but by and large the assumption of the planners has been that the perspectives of problems that exist for the levels of administration and the village are similar. Such an assumption has been made only at great price. Taylor, Ensminger, Johnson, and Joyce remark that they have observed no greater obstacle to the effective understanding of the desires and wishes of villagers". . . than the belief on the part of development leaders that they already know the ideas of villagers and how to communicate ideas to them" (1965: 538).

In spite of the fact that new stirrings of life occur in rural India today and that such stirrings are related in part to the influence of the community development programs, it is clear in the literature that villagers have not responded to program appeals and assistance as readily as has been continuously expected. Part of the failure, of course, can be attributed to factors such as the continuing growth in population, the wars with Pakistan and China that have disrupted planned financial outlays, and the failures in monsoons that have occurred periodically. However important such factors may be -- and there is no question as to their importance -- part of the failure, as well, may be attributed to the problem of communication between the administrative and the village levels.

The aspect of the general communication problem with which I shall deal in this paper concerns the question of understanding the character-

istics of the religious systems involved. I shall maintain that the differences between the belief orientations of the villagers and those of the political and administrative elites are such that a ready flow of communication between the two is basically effected. In doing this, I shall first review the literature on religious systems in the Indian village, then try to conceptualize the characteristics of the village belief systems implied. The final section of this paper will examine the implications of such considerations for development.

RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE:  
A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE AND A CONCEPTUALIZATION

In general, religious systems in village India are only minimally understood when viewed from the perspective of great traditional thought in India.\*\* The philosophical concepts of Hinduism, though they have always been to some extent in interaction with the local tenets and beliefs of village India, have only been incorporated into village belief and action systems after they have passed through the process of what McKim Marriott calls parochialization (1955: 200). This is "a process of localization, of limitation upon the scope of intelligibility, of deprivation of literary forms, of reduction to less systematic and less reflective dimensions." It is a process whereby great traditional tenets are made to fit together with those indigenous to the local setting.

Great traditional forms have seldom had a thoroughgoing influence on those of the little tradition in India. This is partially due to the oft-noted capacities of Hinduism to coexist with, and incorporate disparate belief patterns into, its own general system of understanding. It can be also partially accounted for in relation to the gulf that exists between the elites and the village folk in India. However it came about, it is clear that the little traditions of religious thought in India are distinctively different from those of the great tradition. This can be seen in the studies that have been made.

Pauline Kolenda, in her article "Religious Anxiety and Hindu Fate," surveys the literature on philosophical concepts in Hindu peasant culture (1964: 71-73). She comes to several conclusions which I shall repeat below for they illustrate well the contention that village religious systems can best be understood with respect to their own definitive characteristics. First, most of the recent village studies make no mention of Hindu philosophical concepts, and even some of the writers who are concerned specifically with village religion concentrate on other problems and say little or nothing about basic Hindu philosophical concepts. Second, most of the information on village religion available tends to be impressionistic rather than objectively verifiable. Third, when philosophical concepts are considered significant in the village context, there is the tendency to present them as such with little supporting evidence. Fourth, the achievement of moksha is not a serious goal for most villagers who are concerned more with attaining a better next life, or with attaining heaven and avoiding hell. The attempt to gain the merit which leads to a better next life, or to heaven, is generally thought to be derived from outward religious observances

\*\*The terms great tradition, little tradition, great community, and little community are used here in the sense that they are used in the writings of Robert Redfield.

such as bathing in sacred rivers, giving charity to Brahmins, and going on pilgrimages rather than from good moral character or ethical action. And fifth, most observers indicate that the salient feature of village Hinduism is the propitiation of godlings, ghosts, and demons, usually local and non-Sanskritic rather than great traditional.

In her own discussion of some ideas about karma held by a group of north Indian Untouchables, Kolenda concludes in no uncertain terms (1964: 79):

"It should be clear . . . that the goal of this Sweeper religion is not salvation or a better next life; instead it is concerned with preventing or relieving misfortunes in this world. Philosophical Hinduism is a heroic religion in that it sets forth the highest of goals. Hindu holy books rail against those caught in maya, those attached to the 'real' world. Yet these are the kind of Hindus generally found living in villages, not people fulfilling the heroic ideals held up by the scriptures. Certainly a few of the latter are there, and more are perhaps concerned at times in their lives with moksha. The gap between the heroic and people's real capacities is always great."

Bernard Cohn and E. Kathleen Gough derive similar kinds of conclusions in their own studies. Cohn (1958: 413) finds the Untouchable Chamar informants in an Uttar Pradesh village do not have ideas about rebirth, nor do they rationalize their low status in terms of karma and dharma. Gough (1958: 462) contends that the Nayars of Kottayam, a high warrior caste, appear to use karma chiefly in the justification of their own high-caste status.

More could be said to fortify the contention that villagers view the world differently from those in the great tradition of Hinduism. However, it is not necessary, for the suggestion in the literature is already clear: the magical-animistic rather than the philosophico-religious accounts for the conceptual basis that occurs in the belief systems of village India. What then are the essential characteristics of this belief orientation to the world?

Murray Wax, in a series of publications, argues that the magical-animistic may best be considered holistically, with reference to the world views of those within the little tradition (1960; 1962; 1963; 1964). Because his formulations are clear, they succeed in avoiding many of the pitfalls that Western scholars have confronted in their attempt to theoretically analyze the relations between magic and religion (see his discussion, 1963), and they appear to fit accurately the empirical evidence on religious systems in many different countries, I shall present them here in a tentative way in the attempt to characterize generally the belief systems of those within the little communities of India.

According to Wax -- and his formulations are ideal-typical, fitting in general the Redfield orientation -- the relationships of the "magical

world" are orderly social relationships that link the beings of the universe, both man and the beings of nature, together (1962: 180). Whereas for modern man, the phenomenal world is primarily an "It;" for ancient man and for those within the magical world, it is a "Thou." Furthermore, the relationships that exist between man and the beings of nature are emotionally charged and do not proceed on the assumption that the former are intrinsically distinguishable from the latter in physical makeup.

The social and emotional relationships form the contest of the acquisition and exercise of Power -- that which has been referred in particular regions of the world as mana, wakanda, or baraka. Viewed by the person in the magical world, "Power is awesome and wonderful but, at the same time, it is an intrinsic feature of the natural order, manifesting itself in much of what we (but not he) would consider 'common' or 'ordinary'" (1962:182). Power is never regarded as a permanent and unconditional possession, but may be lost and gained in the matrix of social and emotional relationships in relation to which the person in the magical world interacts. It is accumulated by proper ritual -- ritual that is considered efficacious with reference to the historical and social processes of the society -- and employed in enabling the individual to adjust to the characteristics of his environment. It may be lost or discharged by contact with impure objects or through improper practices and ritual observances.

In the logic of the magical world, no events are the consequence of pure chance or are entirely accidental. Each event has its chain of causation in which Power, or its lack, was the decisive agency. That is, "the magical world has a rigorous causal scheme of a projective and retroactive character: Success demonstrates the presence of Power; failure its absence" (1962: 184). Access to Power brings the bounties of life. Absence of Power leads to misery and poverty. If a person has Power what he does and has been doing is correct. If he lacks Power, what he does and has been doing is incorrect.

Whether an ideal-typical picture of the magical-animistic world as developed by Wax fits in detail the data on village beliefs and practices in rural India in general, or any specific area in particular, is not the question. It doesn't. Nor is it presented for such purposes. What is important, and what is clearly implied above, is the fact that those who operate on a religious basis, formulated on magical-animistic orientations, view the world differently than those who view it in relation to great traditional precepts. This is true with respect to general religious considerations; it is also true when little traditional precepts are compared with those that are rational-scientific.

Max Weber saw the great tradition of Judaeo-Christianity emerging in relation to a total hostility to the magical. Being concerned primarily with rationality and its consequences, he saw the magical as providing basic kinds of obstacles to the emergence of rationality. In Asia -- and with particular reference to Hinduism -- the "hostility to magic" is not so clearly marked in the great traditional religions as it is in the Western world. But here too, the emergence of great traditional religious forms

occured only in relation to the emergence of the elite segments of society. Such forms led to a rationalization of religious goals and processes and a definition of the ultimate values in belief and action systems. This provided for a distinct departure from the orientations of the magical-animistic world.

Whatever the differences between the major traditions of religious observances in India, however, the differences are marked when the views of the little community are contrasted with those of community-development personnel. Planners, the political elites, and administrators involved in the community development program in India have planned and functioned largely in accordance with rational-scientific considerations. Their quotas, procedures, and goals have been systematized and encouraged in rational manner. Moreover, the evaluations that have been conducted by such agencies as the Indian Program Evaluation Organization have always been precise and in many instances biting. Planners and evaluators have worked together in certain instances to improve program operations and have succeeded in sometimes dramatic ways (consider, for example, the emergence and operational objectives of the whole Panchayati Raj system). Certainly none can challenge the contention that the orientations of those responsible for the community development program are basically objective and empirical. And in this they are decisively different from the orientations of those in the magical world as it can be conceptualized.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The problem of communication as it concerns the religious systems involved is complex. The peculiarities of the religious systems in different parts of India (and even in different areas in the same general region), and the exceedingly complex and varied approaches that have been used in community development procedures renders easy generalization difficult. Nevertheless, it seems that the basic kinds of disparities sketched ever so briefly above make certain broad conclusions possible.

It appears first that the effectiveness of the community development program has been consistently hampered by the fact that the approach of the planners and administrators has been narrowly rational-scientific whereas the orientations of those for whom the program is formulated have been generally magical-animistic. That the approach of the first group is objective, of course, is to be expected. What appears to be a major cause of the communication problem is the unwillingness of those who plan and administer to recognize and adequately take into consideration the basically inimical nature of the magical-animistic world when viewed from the perspective of the rational and scientific (Taylor et.al. 1965: 477-554). The result of this failure has been that many of the steps that have been taken in the attempt to make development programs appeal to villagers have been based on shaky assumptions. Understandings have been premised on the contention that no difference in basic orientations to the world exist, and that propositions imposed from above will be accepted by the villagers because mutually reinforcing ideological perspectives result in their appeal to all levels in the society. Given the relatively invalid nature of these premises, the resulting communication problems are almost inevitable.

The emphasis in community development plans and programs has thus far been couched in largely economic terms (Dayal 1965: 49). It has been primarily directed in the effort to catalyze an upward and self-generating socio-economic cycle through the sequential encouragement of villagers (conceived of as economically motivated) with various incentives and activities. Concepts such as "limited good" (Foster 1965), the "traditional society" (Lerner 1958) and the like, though they have broad implications, have been somewhat narrowly interpreted in terms of economic significance, and the significance they have for considerations of world view have been ignored. It is my contention that if the communication of ideas between the major levels of Indian civilization is to proceed more effectively, a more precise account must be made of the effects the various religious systems involved have upon the receipt, interpretation, and possible acceptance of the ideas and actions advocated by the planning and administrative levels.

A second general conclusion concerns the avenues of communication that exist between the great and little traditions of culture, especially as these concern the religious systems involved. The contention that a distrust between villagers and outside representatives occurs needs little argument for the Indian case. Many from the great community in India have considered a listening little community audience to be one that comprehends the message involved. In their charming ways, the Wisers (1963) and Kusum Nair (1961) both show the fallacies of such assumptions. Robert Bower, in his study of communication patterns in India, shows in more social scientific fashion that vast percentages of those within the little community know nothing of what occurs in great community circles (1960: 520). A. Bharati sums up well the character of the distrust that occurs between the great and little traditional forms when he speaks of the great tradition as that which representatives of the city want those in the village to adopt, and the little tradition as that which such representatives want the villagers to discard (1963: 3).

Yet the distrust that occurs does not mean that there is nothing but discontinuity between the traditions and communities of Indian civilization. It simply means that the problem of communication between the levels is exaggerated in India and that available channels of communication must be utilized. As Redfield's model suggests, the respective cultural and social dimensions of civilization are interconnected and mutually influencing, however weakly in certain respects for particular civilizations. For the religious systems of India, reciprocal influencing between the respective traditions has occurred along the already defined channel of parochialization and the reverse channel of "universalization" (Marriott 1955: 197-199). As M. N. Srinivas shows in his discussion of "Sanskritization," a term used in a sense similar to that in which Marriott uses universalization, there exists throughout India a common idiom, derived from great traditional roots, which provides for the linking of the religiously heroic with those of the magical-animistic world (1952). That is, there is a pan-India set of concepts and terms that provides for a common basis to all of those who are "Hindu." The interpretations given to these concepts and terms differ according to the major traditions and they vary in practical significance, as implied in the

in the previous section of this paper; but they provide for an underlying, or perhaps better, mutually influencing avenue of communication between the gen-communities of Indian civilization. This is of significance in the discussion of "communication and development" in India.

According to Srinivas, "westernization" -- a term referring to such things as technical improvements in communication and transportation, urbanization, industrialization, and the new occupational opportunities that come with them, and western style of education -- tends to follow Sanskritization, an increase in level of Sanskritization leading to an increase in tendency to be receptive to ideas of westernization (on this, see Singer's discussion 1965: 99-112). The implications of this for development considerations are immediately recognizable.

In India, as in many other developing countries, the jump desired by planners and community development administrators is an immediate one to modernity, as defined in rational-scientific terms. The jump implies westernization in a somewhat narrowly defined sense. However, what appears to stem from the Srinivas findings is that the step to westernization is, at least in many instances, preceded by the step to Sanskritization. Whether or not this intermediary step is in general an effective, oft-recurring, and facilitating step to westernization (or better, modernization) in India must be examined in further research. Meanwhile, it is important to note, as Singer does (1961), that the values of Sanskritic Hinduism are by no means all antithetical to the emergence and persistence of rational and self-generating economic activities. However, examples and remarks on how the "Sanskritic" or the "universal" element in Hindu culture can be utilized in encouraging development projects can be found in the studies by Morris Opler (1963), R.S. Khare (1963), and M. Luschinsky (1963). These, and other examples readily available, indicate that the common set of concepts and terms that is somewhat pervasive in Indian civilization may provide an effective means whereby particular community development programs can be stimulated. It is somewhat surprising, indeed, in recognition of the tremendous popular support that the Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave movements have gained in the past, that a greater appreciation of the means open for communication with the villagers of India through great traditional religious avenues has not occurred, and that the community development planners have not more effectively exploited such existing avenues in their attempt to encourage self-help projects on the part of villagers. Perhaps, in part, the failure is due to the overemphasis on economic factors referred to above, and to the hostility to the religious as well as the magical-animistic that so often occurs when the rational and objective are given pre-eminence by those who plan and administer in developing countries.

That India in general and the little communities of India in particular are strongly influenced by religious systems of thought and action has been noted by many. To think that development in India's communities will take place without an adequate accounting of the role of the same in the general processes of development seems ridiculous. Any yet, it seems that to date little attention has been given such considerations. It seems to me that the

role of religious systems in the blocking and facilitating of change activities in India can be ignored only at peril. Certainly they are related to an understanding of communication in Indian civilization; and such an understanding is essential if the plans and programs of the elites are to evoke an effective response in those for whom they are formulated.

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