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A Perspective on India's Composite Culture: By Way of Introduction

Yasuhiko NAGANO

National Museum of Ethnology

The region referred to as the Indian cultural sphere is known as a multiethnic and multilingual society, and its most distinctive feature lies in the composite structure of the culture that has evolved there.

In recent years the fieldwork on society and culture that has been undertaken by sociologists and social anthropologists in this region, particularly in India, has made considerable advances, and the fruits accumulated in this field especially in the forty-odd years since the end of World War II have been quite remarkable. As a result of these studies, detailed accounts and analyses of social structure and culture at the village level throughout India have been amassed. As regards more comprehensive perspectives on Indian society and culture in general and perspectives seeking to grasp the mechanisms that have moulded India's distinctive composite culture, however, although a number of noteworthy hypotheses have been put forward, it cannot yet be said that they have assumed any well-defined form.

In considering the formative mechanisms of this composite culture, one may recognize movements from two opposite poles. On the one hand there has been the assimilation of pan-Asian 'indigenous elements' by a Sanskrit-speaking 'higher culture', typified by M. Eliade's central concept of 'Asianized India', while on the other hand there has been the opposite movement of the imitation and absorption of Sanskrit culture by the social strata that have produced folk culture (corresponding to M. N. Śrinivas's 'Sanskritization').

Generally speaking, in the Indian cultural sphere multiple strata of both old and new traditions are found to coexist, and the tendency in the process of its cultural formation for an old tradition not to be rejected by a new tradition, but rather to invariably coexist with new cultural elements and to further evolve through integration with these newer elements has been recognized alike by all researchers in the various fields dealing with this region. When considered in this light, it becomes evident that in a comprehensive understanding of the society and culture of this region both the synchronic study and diachronic study of culture stand in a complementary relationship to one another and that the promotion of research on both of these aspects is of greater importance in the study of the Indian cultural sphere than in that of any other cultural sphere.

Among the existing theories for explaining the integration of India's composite

culture, there have appeared in the field of cultural anthropology, for example, the theories of the above-mentioned Śrinivas and those of M. Marriott and L. Dumont, as well as modified versions of their respective theories. These theories were all proposed in order to surmount the acute difficulties involved in not being able to apply existing research methods that arose when the object of research shifted from the stage of a self-contained society in which the observation of its social and cultural elements had direct bearings on the understanding of the society and culture as a whole, as was the case in the societies dealt with by early anthropologists, to more complex and extensive societies or societies with long histories of recorded literature.

On the basis of his fieldwork among the Coorgs of southern India, Śrinivas presented a descriptive analysis of their social structure and rituals, and he offered valuable suggestions for subsequent research on Hinduism. In particular, his comments on the concepts of 'purity' and 'impurity' are still cited in current research on Indian society and religion. His analysis was, however, valid only insofar that he applied functionalism to a highly self-sufficient society such as that of the Coorgs, and once it came to extending this framework to the Hindu world as a whole and discussing its diversity and unity, his theories lost some of their validity. In other words, when dealing with levels on which direct observation is impossible it becomes necessary to adopt totally different methods of analysis. Because in the view of Śrinivas it is the Brahmin who represents the embodiment of 'pan-Indian Hinduism', his viewpoint results in an exposition of the universality of Hinduism formulated by referring to the classical literature preserved by only the Brahmin class and by piecing together the elements found recorded therein.

Marriott, on the other hand, undertook a study of ritual based on village fieldwork conducted in Uttar Pradesh, and in his analysis he availed himself of the concepts of the 'great tradition' and 'little tradition' proposed by R. Redfield. The 'great tradition' represents the tradition that has been fostered by an intellectual elite minority, while the 'little traditions' are those traditions that have been nurtured by the nonliterate majority. The former corresponds to Śrinivas's 'pan-Hinduism' and the latter to his 'local Hinduism'. By introducing these concepts, Marriott succeeded in pointing out the connections between pan-Hinduism and local Hinduism, the treatment of which had been inadequate in Śrinivas's analysis, and in clarifying the dynamism operating in the process whereby a little tradition is transformed into a great tradition ('universalization') and the process whereby a great tradition is transformed into a little tradition ('parochialization'). But even though the allocation of various elements may be possible by regarding those elements alluded to in Sanskrit texts as representing the great tradition and those not thus alluded to as belonging to a little tradition, this cannot be said to represent an accurate analysis of the structure and significance of each of these traditions. In this sense Marriott too may be considered to have become entrapped in the same quagmire as Śrinivas.

By way of contrast, the standpoint of Dumont differed somewhat from that of

the above two precursors. He attempted to analyze primarily the society of southern India, and he attached the greatest importance to the understanding of society through the medium of the conceptual system, or ideology, appertaining to social life. He did, of course, undertake meticulous fieldwork and did not neglect microanalysis based on his data. But what is important here is the fact that, by taking account of the conceptual system, he was able to maintain quite consistently his standpoint of examining both the interconnections between cultural elements and their relations with the context of society as a whole. In other words, whereas Śrinivas and others had failed in their attempt to gain an overview of Hinduism as a whole because they had adhered too closely to the concrete plane, Dumont, although basing himself on localized concrete examples, was able to present a view on a more abstract level by placing concepts deduced from these concrete examples at the centre of his arguments. But, needless to say, Indian society and culture cannot be explained by only the ideas propounded by Dumont, and one might say that there is a need for a diversity of more persuasive expository principles.

The limitations of anthropological studies prior to Dumont may also be said to have resulted from the fact that researchers had attempted to present a diachronic purview from the standpoint of a synchronic perspective. In the understanding based on the diachronic viewpoint of traditional Indology and related disciplines, on the other hand, it is no exaggeration to say that there had been virtually no attempts to formulate hypothetical models on the basis of the material that had been accumulated, and it is only the studies by P. Hacker, H. Kulke, M. Witzel and others in recent years that have been attracting some attention as attempts to break fresh ground. As has been pointed out by Dumont himself, for an understanding of Indian society fieldwork by anthropologists and philological research by Indologists must be pursued conjointly.

In this sense there is at present a demand for a new form of joint research aiming at a comprehensive understanding of the Indian cultural sphere by combining the diachronic perspective fostered by Indology, Tibetology and comparative philology since the nineteenth century with the synchronic perspective of social structure theory, cultural anthropology and descriptive linguistics. It might also be suggested that the accumulated achievements born of these differing perspectives have now reached the stage where such comprehensive research ought to be attempted.

In view of these circumstances, we undertook to conduct a joint study devoted to an interdisciplinary comparison of the structure and formative factors of the composite culture of the Indian cultural sphere from the viewpoints of religious studies, philology, cultural anthropology and linguistics. This joint study was supported by the Monbusho International Scientific Research Program (#62041078 and #63041136), Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Japan. Following a critical appraisal of the results of this study from various angles, it was decided to bring together in a single volume the fruits of the research focussing on religious and anthropological aspects and to publish the results of the linguistic research,

being somewhat different in nature, in another form.

Although the contents of this volume have been broadly defined as coming under either the cultural anthropological approach or the religious approach, this division is based simply on the subject matter most frequently dealt with by cultural anthropology and religious studies respectively when considered in very general terms, and it has not been our intention to make any clear-cut distinction in regard to content or method.

All the contributions are based on primary materials, and although they treat of minute particulars, they each give clear expression to the writer's stance in his understanding of India in a broad sense. We believe that this volume will contribute to Indian studies and to the formulation of general theories on cultural complexes in the future, and we welcome any comments from our readers.