

# Supreme Court on Right to Education

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*While the Supreme Court, in its recent judgment in the Mohini Jain v Karnataka case, may be faulted on both doctrinal and practical grounds for its use of article 21 of the Constitution for articulating the right to education, its indictment of the capitation fee system has not come a day too soon.*

THE Supreme Court has recently declared that right to education was a fundamental right and that the charging of capitation fee was arbitrary, unfair and therefore violative of the fundamental right to equality contained in article 14 of the Constitution. Since the decision of the Supreme Court is the law of the land,<sup>1</sup> the above decision has created a storm in the educational world. The immediate reactions have been hostile to the decision. Usual comments such as that the court has gone too far or that the decision is impractical have already come in. While we share the court's agony over the immoral practice of capitation fee in the new medical and engineering colleges, some wider propositions enunciated therein need careful examination. The purpose of this article is to examine the three leading propositions, namely (1) that every person has the right to education as part of his right to live with dignity included in article 21 of the Constitution; (2) that the practice of capitation fee is violative of the guarantee of equality enshrined in article 14 of the Constitution; and (3) that the state is under a constitutional mandate to provide educational institutions at all levels for the benefit of its citizens.

(1) *Is there a right to education in every person? Is such right a fundamental right?*

The court has obviously made a mistake in holding that there exists anything like right to education. There is certainly a right to equality of opportunities of education. The right to education may exist as a human right to the extent of primary or basic education. Such right is an essential precondition to the exercise of other rights of citizenship such as right to vote or right to freedom of speech and expression. Such a right could be included within the fold of article 21 which guarantees right to life and personal liberty which has been held by the Supreme Court to include the right to live with dignity.<sup>2</sup> However, until the decision of the court in *Mohini Jain* case, article 21 was not held to include the right to primary education. The fact that there is a directive principle of state policy which clearly enjoins upon the state to provide

free and compulsory primary education for all children below the age of 14<sup>3</sup> clearly shows that even the right to primary education was not included as a fundamental right.

This writer has submitted elsewhere that right to primary education must become a fundamental right.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the literacy rate in India even by 1991 census has not gone beyond 50 per cent shows clearly that such a right does not exist. If it exists in law but does not exist in life, it would be worse. But even if we succeed in making the right to education up to the primary level an enforceable right, can there ever be a right to become a doctor or an engineer or a lawyer? One can at the most claim that one has a right to compete for getting into these professions and in order that such competition should be fair, there should be equal opportunities. One may or may not get admission to a medical or engineering college. This will depend upon one's competitive merit and financial capacity. A person has no right to be admitted to such an institution though he has a right not to be denied admission on the ground of his religion, race, caste, place of birth and, unless the institution is exclusively for men or women, sex.<sup>5</sup> Further he has a right not to be denied admission except on the ground of merit. The only exception the Constitution makes is in respect of persons belonging to socially and educationally backward classes of people for whom seats are reserved in such educational institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The danger of declaring even right to primary education as a fundamental right is the same as that involved in declaring the right to shelter or the right to health care as fundamental rights. Unless the state pursues social and economic policies under which such rights could be secured, their mere judicial articulation would only widen the gap between the normative order and the social reality. This would cause erosion of the credibility of the court as an institution and ultimately adversely affect its social legitimacy. However, there cannot be any right to education at all levels. There is no doubt freedom to obtain education which one

may do even without going to any educational institution.

The right to live with dignity has to be understood in terms of securing irreducible minimum entitlements which are essential prerequisites of such living with dignity. It could be invoked in support of the right to primary education whereby one acquires the capacity to learn and pursue higher education but not with respect to the right to higher education. Higher education is a resource which must be used economically. Everyone may not need it and may not possess the capacity for it. It should be available to those who need it and who have the capacity to take it. Therefore, equal opportunities are enough. To say that the right to education is a fundamental right would make the right so impracticable that it would lose all its force.

(2) *Capitation fee—is it violative of the right to equality?*

Capitation fees are charged by private educational institutions. These institutions cannot be called instrumentalities or agencies of the state within the meaning of that word as used in article 12 of the Constitution. They do not get any government grants. The government merely gives them affiliation to a university. Such affiliation gives them recognition.

It is true that when such capitation fee colleges are opened, they provide additional opportunities to rich students as against the poor. But such disparity of opportunities is not only in respect of medical and engineering colleges. Our whole education system is based on segregation between the rich and the poor. There are expensive schools in which only the rich people can afford to send their children. Since inequality is pervading all social spheres, education cannot become an island of equality.

Mohini Jain, the petitioner in this case, was admitted to the medical college in Karnataka but she could not take advantage of the admission as she could not pay Rs 60,000 per year as fee. In fact fees chargeable in our state-run medical and engineering colleges are pitifully small and education of almost every student is subsidised by the state. The fee structure in our universities must be rationalised. But if every student were to pay for his education, very few would be able to take professional education. Although there is a case for upward revision of the fees in higher education, it must be understood that such upward revision has limits and in spite of it state support or subsidy for education cannot be dispensed with. The court objected to Rs 60,000 as fee because it was rather high. In the court's opinion it was a colourable device for capitation fee.

The economics of higher education will have to be carefully worked out. Those who wish to start a medical college or an

engineering college must collect enough corpus funds before their proposal for such an institution is considered by the government or the university. The institutions must also mobilise funds from alumni on a regular basis. If the fees are high, the government must provide for enough number of merit scholarships and loan scholarships to enable the poor but meritorious students, including those from the socially and educationally backward classes, to study these courses. The fee structure will depend upon the expenses that are required to be incurred for the course. They will be higher for courses in medicine, engineering and other science or technological disciplines than for courses in humanities and social sciences.

The policy of allowing private educational institutions to charge inordinately higher fees and even capitation fee means total abandonment by the state of its responsibility for higher education. The opening up of such private educational institutions which seek to trade in professional education is harmful to the nation in many ways. It doubtless aggravates social and economic inequality because the rich have greater access to professional education than the poor. Medicine and engineering are two professions most sought after by students in India because they are believed to offer sizeable earnings and high social status. If access to such professions is available on merit, respect for meritocracy is enhanced. On the other hand, if one can have access to these professions on money power, it would lead to further denigration of merit as a value. This would also mar upward social mobility and perpetuate the hold of the same elite on social structure. This would lead to social stagnation and produce social discontent which could ultimately jeopardise social stability. The state must therefore intervene to prevent this. This is usually the idea behind anti-capitation fee laws.

The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law. Although it does not forbid discrimination on the ground of wealth, as it forbids discrimination on the ground of religion, caste, race, sex, etc, wealth can be a criterion of discrimination only to give advantage to the poor. The Income-tax Act imposes greater tax liability on the rich. The poor are given concessions in fees in education. These are examples of discrimination on the ground of wealth or income. But any discrimination in favour of the rich and against the poor would not meet the test of reasonable classification which has to be the basis of differential treatment. After all, the Constitution clearly says that the state shall direct its policy towards securing "that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the com-

mon good" and that "the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment".<sup>7</sup> Justice Kuldeep Singh was therefore right in holding that the capitation fee charged with the connivance or permission of the state amounts to violation of the right to equality.

It is true that there are institutions which charge high fees even for school education and they act as a means of segregation between the rich and the poor students. Since the state in India has not brought the system of neighbourhood schools, such segregation is bound to prevail. Since such educational institutions do not receive any state grant, they could be treated as being outside the purview of the constitutional guarantee of equality. But even they should not be allowed to charge capitation fee. Higher fee has to be distinguished from capitation fee. But professional colleges in medicine and engineering which provide career opportunities and entrance to professions which are supposed to render valuable social services cannot be left to the commercial lust of a few educational entrepreneurs. Access to professional education determines the future distribution of material resources of the community.

We must make a distinction between privatisation and commercialisation. Private effort in education has been the mainstay of our educational enterprise. It has had a long tradition beginning with Tilak and Agarkar and later followed by Maharshi Karve, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil and B R Ambedkar. They started educational institutions with the aim of making education accessible to large number of people and particularly to those who had been denied it for generations. The new entrepreneurs are setting up institutions to take advantage of the present demand for professional education in medicine or engineering which has become a craze with upper middle class boys and girls. This has become an industry which requires minimum investment and assures enormous profits without any risk. It is bad not only because it further accentuates social inequality but also because it results in fall of educational standards and would ultimately lead to decline of professional standards also.

(3) *Must the state provide educational institutions at all levels?*

We are grateful to the court for emphasising the duty of the state to provide educational institutions at all levels. It does not mean that all such institutions should be run by the state. The state may allow private institutions to provide education but such institutions have to be subject to control of the state and have to conform to what the Constitution of India enjoins. There cannot be *laissez-faire* in education. The state must find resources for education. In fact the Plan

allocation for education has always been meagre. The state cannot plead that because it has to provide for primary education it would now withdraw from higher education and allow private institutions to trade in it. Education, health and shelter need to be high priority subjects for state intervention. If we have not abandoned social justice as aim of our polity, the state cannot say that because it has no money it will allow education to suffer.

If primary education is required for enabling people to live with dignity and therefore must be made a fundamental right, higher education will provide competent-manpower for performing various services for society. Society requires able administrators, efficient professionals like doctors, engineers, chartered accountants and lawyers, competent technologists and scientists and various social scientists and scholars of humanities who would maintain the high cultural level of societal life. The money spent on higher education is a good investment in human development. No civilised state, much less a democratic state, would excuse itself from playing a pivotal role in providing excellence in education.

The proper remedy is to find out how best its resources could be used for promoting excellence and how to avoid waste. The system of education needs to be made more accountable. Where education is a prerequisite for practising a profession and the society grants monopoly to such licence-holders to practise that profession, it must decide how many and who should be admitted to the profession. The entitlement to practise must go by who deserves rather than who can afford. In deciding who deserves, social justice considerations are bound to come in but in such a way as not to dilute excellence.

There is criticism in some circles against the Supreme Court's decision. We have pointed out that the Court's use of article 21 for articulating the right to education could be faulted on doctrinal as well as practical considerations. However, the court's indictment of the capitation fee system has not come a day too soon. If some people think that the court has gone too far or has indulged in judicial adventurism, we could only say that to them the Constitution of India itself might sound "strange and irrelevant."

## Notes

- 1 Article 141, Constitution of India.
- 2 *Francis Cora lie Mullin v Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi* AIR 1981 SC 746; *Bandhua Mukti Morchav Bihar*, AIR 1984, SC 802.
- 3 Article 45.
- 4 S P Sathe, *The Right to Know* (1991, Tripathi) p 4.
- 5 Article 15(1), 16(2), 29(2).
- 6 Article 15(4) and Article 16(4).
- 7 Article 39, clauses (b) and (c).

# Education in Andhra

M Shalrugna

## *Andhra Pradesh's new admission policy for minority institutions will result in squeezing the educational opportunities of poor students.*

CLOSE on the heels of the policy of privatisation of higher education on commercial lines, the Janardhan Reddy government has decided to alter the rules of recognition of minority-run institutions and has adopted an admission policy shifting the emphasis away from community-based concessions giving more powers to managements, defeating the letter and spirit of Article 30(1) of the Constitution. Accordingly the earlier government orders on admission policy are scrapped, favouring easier entry to non-minority community students who can afford to pay the high fees.

A brief perusal of the prevailing rules governing minority community institutions shows the extent to which the new policy is disadvantageous to the educational needs of the poorer segments of the minority communities. According to the prevailing rules, the aims and objects

(1) of the educational agency (minority-run institutions) incorporated in its bye-laws should clearly specify that it is meant to primarily serve the interests of the minority community (religious or linguistic) to which they claim to belong in the letter and spirit (GOMS 526 Section 4(4)).

Further,

the educational institutions established and managed by the minorities (religious or linguistic) shall serve the educational needs of their community to which they claim to belong by making substantially high percentage of admissions with the candidates belonging to the concerned community (Section 4(6)).

Also,

... only educational institutions are entitled for according recognition as of minority and not the society/trust/committee and the like, managing the institution (Section 11(12)).

Additionally the minority community educational agency shall follow the following guidelines while making admission of students especially into professional colleges. In the field of professional education the institution shall admit

students belonging to the concerned community from among the merit list of students prepared by the competent authority conducting the common entrance examination on the basis of the ranking assigned in the entrance examination (13(0)).

Besides, they will admit students

belonging to other than the concerned community on the basis of the ranking assigned in the common entrance examination, as allotted by the competent authority for making admission. In such a case the rule

of reservation as prescribed by the government from time to time shall be followed

On fees to be charged,

... the fee structure prescribed by the government for all educational institutions is also applicable to minority educational institutions. However, with the prior approval of the competent authority, the unaided minority educational institutions may collect higher fee from students, if they cannot maintain the institution with the fee prescribed by the government (Section 17).

All the above mentioned provisions are now sought to be scrapped on the grounds that the provisions of the government orders "... have proved detrimental to the interests of the minority educational institutions in the state...", according to a press note circulated by the chief minister's office on July 8. But no data was furnished to substantiate the charge. The government in a most peculiar manner has sought to define the terminology of the government orders to serve the interests of the managements. For instance, take the term 'substantial', a crucial term to indicate the quantum of percentage of seats has been defined to mean 50 per cent. When asked to clarify, a senior official of the education department confided that the term was never meant to be 50 per cent as interpreted by the chief minister. It normally meant 80 to 95 per cent. In any case, the new policy declares that the minority educational institutions "... will also be not required to admit more than 50 per cent students belonging to the (concerned) minority community", giving an entirely misleading interpretation of the provisions of the impugned GO to the detriment of the poorer sections of the concerned minority community students. As a result of this any student who can afford the fees can now get admission irrespective of the community to which he belongs at the expense of the so-called unmerited, poor minority community students.

Also so far mere registration of a minority institution was not sufficient to secure government recognition. A Minority certificate issued by a competent authority was necessary to claim the privilege. This provision was incorporated to discourage mimic minority institutions as hundreds of namesake institutes have sprung up demanding 'minority' status. Now however, registration of a society with minority members as management

committee is sufficient to claim minority status. Earlier a 'minority certificate' was valid for a period of five years, subject to renewal. Now this clause has become redundant, paving the way for the registration of minority managements of questionable intent.

The above policy changes are to be seen in the backdrop of the 'capitation fees' policy of the government. The government has already earmarked 50 per cent of the seats in the professional courses for students who can pay the capitation fees. This provision is fully utilised by the minority institutions. But past experience has shown that weaker segments among the minority community have not been able to utilise the opportunity fully as they are too poor to pay the high fees. The minority managements instead of helping the indigent and needy have been filling the seats with prosperous sections of the non-minority communities. The managements' contention that the "50 per cent rule" is financially non-viable is also untenable as differential fees structure for minority and non-minority Students as a possible solution has not been accepted. Instead, the high fees is retained with some concessions offered to the poorer students from charitable trusts floated by the managements. Yet another aspect of the admission policy is that no SC, ST or BC reservations are acceptable/implemented in unaided minority institutions. The situation is worse in the professional colleges. Even in the so-called "50 per cent open merit quota", SC, ST, BC reservations need not be implemented. To 'rebut' such legitimate criticisms the managements have been pressurising the government to scrap the existing rules of admission altogether. The Janardhan Reddy government as part of the privatisation policy has complied with the demand after finalising the new policy following a meeting of the MIM legislators (who themselves are running lucrative educational institutions). Interestingly the team was led by the export promotion minister Mohd Jani.

It is no wonder that the decision of the chief minister was welcomed 'heartily' by known education peddlers like Nawab Shah Alam Khan, who had been running one of the richest 'minority' institutions in the city. Further, the timing of the talks between the MIM delegation and the chief minister on such a crucial issue makes one suspect that the bonanza was granted keeping in view the presidential poll of July 13. Interestingly the government note says that the chief minister's announcement was welcomed by several leaders of the minorities including Amjad Ali Khan, retired IAS officer, Shah Alam Khan, member, board of management, Osmania University and Vizarat Rasool Khan, former MLA.

# Social Technology: A New Factor in Development

Surendra J Patel

*In discussions on growth, exclusive attention has been given to the visible physical inputs. The invisible technological inputs embodied in human skills were disregarded. Contribution of skills to growth was thereby ignored. Since both physical capital and social inputs embody different forms of technology it is appropriate to call these two motive forces of technological transformation physical and social technology. This essay is devoted to a discussion on the role of social technology.*

The real source of wealth lies no longer in raw materials, the labour force or machines, but in having a scientific, educated, technological manpower base. Education has become the real wealth of the new age.

[J D Bernal, *Science in History*, 1965, p 171

IT has been recognised for nearly 30 years that inputs of capital and labour are not the only sources of technological transformation. Technological inputs, such as skills of the labour force and social and institutional inventions and innovations, have indeed contributed even more than capital and labour to overall economic growth. Development economics has given them various names: the residual, neglected factors, human capital formation and an increase in productive resources. In contrast to physical, tangible, visible capital, these factors relate to invisible social inputs—skills embodied in human beings and efficiency—promoting institutional and social factors.

In earlier discussions on growth, exclusive attention was given to the visible physical inputs. The invisible technological inputs embodied in human skills were disregarded. Contribution of skills to growth was thereby ignored. But both the physical capital and social inputs embody different forms of technology. It is more appropriate therefore to call these two motive forces of technological transformation physical and social technology.

The role of capital formation, or physical technology, in development has been so clearly recognised that it is not necessary to discuss it here in detail. On the other hand, the contribution of social technology is in general considered to be important, but it has not been discussed in detail in development literature. This study is therefore devoted to social technology.

## Search for Sources of Technological Transformation

The search for sources of transformation is as old as the search for the source of the Nile. Aristotle was already seized with it at the dawn of civilisation. Adam Smith had carefully chosen the title of his masterpiece: *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published over 2,000 years after Aristotle first wrote on the sub-

ject. In the recent period, growth was for long mainly attributed to machinery and equipment, or capital formation, or physical technology. R F Harrod immortalised this notion in 1939 in his famous equation for growth.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, the capital/output ratio (COR) has come to be used as a simple short cut for estimating capital requirements of development plans. The importance of social technology was recognised only as an afterthought when it came to manpower planning. The COR was used as early as 1951 by the first Expert Group convened by the United Nations to explore the growth possibilities for the underdeveloped countries. In its report on *Measures for the Economic Development of the Underdeveloped Regions*, it estimated the net COR to be as high as 8:1.<sup>3</sup> This was indeed an absurdly high figure since the historical CORs have generally been much lower, varying between 2:1 to 4:1.

Then came the historic contribution of R Solow, placing technological progress at the centre of economic growth. Solow dramatically showed in 1957 that nearly nine-tenths of the growth of per capita income in the United States of America over the four decades to 1949 owed its origin to technological progress. Inputs of capital and labour were responsible for only one-tenth of the growth. Since then, there has been much discussion on the key role of this input in relation to others. Studies by M Abramovitz [1956], E F Denson [1962] and others substantiated Solow's findings.<sup>4</sup>

T W Schultz added to this growing body of knowledge a specific emphasis on human capital formation, mainly reflected by investments in education and training of the workforce. It was asserted that the contribution of inputs of labour and physical capital to the total growth of output was rather small if not altogether marginal. Much the larger contribution was made by the enlargement of the skill profile of the labour force, economies of scale and embodiment of technological progress in the production process.<sup>5</sup>

These new findings were incorporated in the overall growth analysis by S S Kuznets [1966].<sup>6</sup> Social technology was singled out as the real source of wealth by J D Bernal in 1966.<sup>7</sup> The strategic significance of these

contributions may be seen in their having contributed to three awards of Nobel Prizes in economics [Kuznets, Solow and Schultz].

Examining the factors which have contributed to the economic growth of nations, Kuznets had summarised already in 1966 the new historical evidence in these words:

... the inescapable conclusion is that the direct contribution of manhours and capital accumulation would hardly account for more than a tenth of the rate of growth in per capita product—and probably less. The large remainder must be assigned to an increase in the productive resources—a rise in output per unit of input, due either to the improved quality of the resources, or to the effects of changing arrangements, or to the impact of technological change, or to all three... Since education and economies of scale are results of additions to and spread of the stock of useful knowledge, the dominant role of the latter—compared with the increase in input of resources—in the rise in product per capita is apparent.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis in discussions explaining economic growth had thus shifted from the use of physical capital to the dominant role of technological progress. This was a considerable advance over Harrod's important but simplistic COR of 1938 vintage. The central role of technology in promoting economic development was thus recognised. Technology was brought into the mainstream of development. But this recognition has so far remained mostly formal in nature. It has been limited to footnote references. Sometimes textual citations too have been made here and there. But it has not been embodied in constructing an analytical framework and devising operational tools for development planning. Social technology has remained the stepchild of development economics.

Development economists left this subject at the point to which Solow, Schultz and Kuznets had brought it by the 1960s. The subsequent discussions shifted mainly to the measurement of costs and benefits of education. The old contributions still continue to be ritually quoted. But little analytical as well as empirical progress was made in integrating the relative roles of physical and social technology in technological transformation.

Technologists and scientists have also not taken the subject any further. They did begin a discussion of the interrelationship between

science and technology. This was followed by studies of micro-sectors and technology policies. A few countries prepared the so-called science and technology plans. All this ended with the now too-familiar demands for simply raising the allocation of resources to science and technology in general, and R and D in particular. Like economists, science and technology policy-makers too continued to quote the old contributions on technology in support of these demands. But they did not contribute much of analytical or operational significance. There was little progress towards defining the role of technology in the development process as a whole.

The reasons for such limited progress have not been properly assessed. One possible reason may be that despite the path-breaking contributions of Solow, Schultz and Kuznets, the notion of technology has in general continued to be associated with spectacular results of advances in physical sciences and innovative engineering. They have not yet embraced the field of social technology, which embodies advances in social sciences, social inventions and innovations, and social engineering. In consequence, technology has continued to be associated with breakthroughs in the physical sciences and related technological innovations in mechanics and engineering—e.g. the steam engine, diesel motor, electric motor and generator, means of communications, durable consumer goods, machinery and equipment, nuclear energy, space rockets, computers and similar innovations. Both development economists and scientists and technologists have continued to concentrate mainly on technology embodied in capital equipment, machinery, instruments and tools.

Taking a historical view, however, we may note that the Greeks had originally defined 'techne' as an art—even as proficiency in the art of elocution in the earlier period. Later on, newly emerging crafts were incorporated into the word 'techne'. Both the social and physical streams were then covered by the same word.

The separation between these two streams must have, therefore, come about in the later period limiting the usage of the word 'technology' to physical products and processes. Could this have arisen from the simple fact that technology as such has no physical form? Like beauty or soul, it always appears vicariously embodied in visible physical goods and processes. It is not visible as are physical products and processes. This invisibility could have been responsible for the latter being taken as the exclusive embodiments of technology. Popularisation of this usage could have then been strengthened by the extraordinary successes of physical sciences, engineering and industrialisation in the last two centuries.

The usage overlooked the fact that advances in knowledge were incorporated not only in machinery, equipment, instruments and tools used in producing and processing goods. They were also embodied at the same

time, indeed even before, in the agile minds and deft fingers of human beings which conceived, designed and constructed the physical equipment. Both these streams of technology, the visible physical and the invisible social, need therefore to be taken into account.

## II

### Social Technology as a Motive Force of Technological Transformation

Classical economists had already drawn attention to the role of labour in the production of commodities. Marx had indeed singled out labour as the generator of all values, though his emphasis was more on unskilled, undifferentiated simple labour.

The three elements included by Kuznets as key factors in economic development have not been properly christened. For terminological clarity, we have summarised them into one concept: social technology. It covers all advances in skills acquired by people individually and collectively.

These skills are not only limited to the process of physical production. They also cover a wide spectrum of individual and social skills: for instance, skills for organising and managing efficient working of individual plants as well as the entire economic and social system; the distribution of new products and processes; research and development and design engineering for future advances. Social technology thus encompasses not only the individual's skills employed in carrying out his or her own economic activity. The collective influence of the working together of all components of society, including policies pursued by governments, and economic social and political institutions, must also be included in social technology. Social technology exercises a synergistic influence on the process of technological transformation precisely because of the multiplicity of these factors.

No indicator reflects the development of social technology more clearly than education at all its levels (primary, secondary and university). Other streams, including informal training and learning by doing, are also important. But they are difficult to measure. Moreover, their growth path may in general run parallel—and not counter—to that of education. Enrolment in education, with all its known limitations, has therefore been used as a proxy indicator of social technology.<sup>9</sup>

Since so much has been made of advances in physical technology, it may be useful to balance the picture by listing here a few examples of the achievements in social technology in several areas. The listing below is not in any systematic order of casual significance. But it may serve an illustrative purpose.

1 Production: division of labour, use of machinery, factory, mass production, assembly line, time and motion study,

piece rates, systems of incentives;

- 2 Exchange: market, barter, prices, coins, currencies, credit, interest, insurance, cheque, banking, central banks, foreign exchange, exchange rates;
- 3 Organisation: partnership, private and public joint stock company, stock exchange, transnational corporations, public enterprises, management, marketing;
- 4 Social innovations: clan, family, tribe, nation state, democracy, adult franchise, voting, elections, parliaments, trade unions, political parties, social philosophies and social systems, equality, freedom, human rights;
- 5 Operations of the state: law and order, justice, stability, taxes, subsidies, social transfers, laws, regulations, policies, development plans, strategies, education, health, transport, infrastructure, ministries, para-statal organisations;
- 6 Health care: organisation of clinics, private and public health care, national health service, preventive medicine, primary health care, 'Health for All by the Year 2000';
- 7 Education and training: artisans, apprentices, religious teaching, universal primary, extended secondary and wider third level training, institutes of technology, vocational schooling, organisation of resources for R and D, centres of excellence;
- 8 Community: religions, ethics, social norms and standards, customs of behaviour, institutions for social cohesion, scripts, libraries, museums;
- 9 Multinational initiatives: institutional structures such as Councils of States, League of Nations, United Nations and its specialised agencies, development cooperation, New International Economic Order, disarmament, settlement of conflicts and several similar inventions.

This is an incomplete list. But it is meant simply to underline that social interventions and innovations are no less significant, or even less awe-inspiring, than the physical innovations referred to earlier. But no litanies of praise, to borrow a formulation used by Kuznets<sup>10</sup> in another context, have been so far sung for these and other similar advances, in social technology. All the well known breakthroughs in physical technology would probably have not even taken place if they were not preceded by relevant social innovations. The latter fostered the birth of future advances in physical technologies, and nursed them to maturity when they did arrive.

## III

### Complexities in Measuring the Contribution of Social Technology

Long-term data on physical technology, or capital formation, have been for long available in considerable detail covering

country by country and sector by sector information. In contrast, data on social technology is rather scanty, except perhaps for health and education. In the absence of demand for these data, conceptual elaboration of methodologies and cumulative data build-up have remained inadequate. Part of this inadequacy is also explained by the greater complexity of the impact of social technology than of physical technology. Some of them may be briefly touched upon here.

We may begin with some magnitudes. The share of health, education and social services (including transfer payments for social welfare) in GDP had gone up from only about 1 per cent up to the late 18th century to 5-10 per cent in the late 19th, and to some 20 per cent or over now, equalling that of physical capital in several countries and in some even surpassing it. It has been higher in the north and higher still in the welfare states and socialist economies, but lower in the south.

By and large, the growth and the size of resources devoted to social technology in the south have paralleled and in general equalled those of physical technology in the north. But unlike physical capital formation, these magnitudes (even when large) are not yet treated as social capital formation. It is therefore important to estimate the value and productivity of stock of human capital formation and compare their level and trends with those of physical capital formation.

With a careful use of data already available for several countries, it should now be possible to initiate comparisons between contributions of physical and social technology. Their results would lead to several questions of both theoretical and operational significance. For instance, total resources devoted to social technology both in developed and developing countries are not that much lower than those for physical technology. But the contribution of social technology to development has been estimated to be significantly larger in both the north and the south. In consequence, the social technology/output ratio would be considerably lower than for physical technology.

A question immediately arises whether these two streams can be taken as alternatives. If they are real alternatives, much greater resources could then be diverted to social technology, thereby contributing to the acceleration of technological transformation. Perhaps there are certain interrelationships between, the two streams so that one cannot be expanded without the other if the objective is to achieve the most efficient allocation of resources. Some kind of a law of joint inputs may be operating here. But the precise magnitudes, interrelationships and impacts on output of these two streams remain to be analysed.

The very notion of development returns need a careful re-examination. Owing to the concepts developed and the data base built-up, the returns on capital are now less dif-

ficult to estimate. Many empirical studies have been devoted to the subject. A much clearer grasp of returns to capital is now possible through the use of several techniques, including social cost/benefit analysis. But a systematic study of returns on social technology yet remains to be undertaken.

Past studies have not satisfactorily resolved one major conceptual problem. Social technology, unlike physical technology, serves at the same time both as a means as well as an end of development. Physical technology, on the other hand, serves only as a means to development. Plants, factories and similar productive facilities, embodying physical technology, are never built as final ends by themselves. These do not serve even an artistic purpose, as for example does the Taj Mahal. They cannot therefore be by themselves goals of development. They are established as means only for the sole purpose of expanding output.

In contrast, social technology has a dual character. It is needed as a means to raise the level of output of goods and services. But it is also by itself a goal, an end of development. For instance, better education, greater health, wider spread of social welfare facilities help, not only raise productive capabilities but also satisfy basic needs and urges of the people. These are therefore also goals of development. Social technology thus serves at the same time both as an end and as a means for forthcoming development. Like Shakespeare's mercy, it is twice blessed—as a consumption good and an investment good. It therefore should appear on both sides of the growth equation.

This duality in the role of social technology would tend to complicate the task of measurement of its contribution to growth of output. It would seem that this contribution would in reality turn out to be even greater both at a point of time and over a period of time than shown by Solow and others. Apart from higher incomes earned in the market by those whose skills reflect a larger embodiment of social technology, their possession of learning and good health also gives them much higher personal satisfaction. When the welfare effects of such satisfactions are taken into account, the yield from investment in social technology would prove to be significantly larger.

An important consideration concerns the very concept of physical technology and social technology as resources for raising output. They require clearly separate treatment as growth resources. Apart from serving merely as means to raising output, physical technology wears out in the process of production. It is subject to rapid obsolescence calling for continuous replacement.

In sharp contrast, social technology does not wear itself out in this fashion. Instead of depreciating in use, it usually appreciates over time. It does, of course, face obsolescence with rapid changes in the type and level of skills required, but this is overcome through training on the job and

retraining. Only senility and death of the individual detracts from the stock. But then there are continuous additions to the stock by the newly trained persons joining the workforce.

To measure all these parameters would require breakthroughs in concepts and techniques. But some basis already exists. The techniques of cost/benefit analysis for education and of estimation of capital value of skilled migration (brain drain, or reverse transfer or technology as it was called in UNCTAD studies) have already furnished the basic tools which could, with appropriate adaptations also be applied to the measurement of social technology.<sup>11</sup>

There are, moreover, several questions of immediate operational significance. Indicators of social significance in the south show a more resilient picture than do parallel indicators on economic growth. This point has been forcefully brought out in a recent study prepared for UNICEF by Mahesh Patel.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the south's progress in reducing death rates, infant mortality ratios and illiteracy, and spreading education has been considerably greater than in meeting broader economic targets. Does this then mean that social technology offers a more efficient way to all-round development than physical technology? Or perhaps, it is a worthier objective to pursue? Here is again a question which merits rigorous exploration. The incorporation of social technology into the mainstream of development economics will thereby add a new analytical tool for the discipline and increase its relevance and predictive power.

Particularly striking has been the advance of the south in health and education. But that is rarely noticed. The calamities, disasters faced by the south are daily feed for news. Spectacular development in health and education in the south has not received the attention it merits. Owing to its sheer size and speed, the health and educational gap between the north and the south has been significantly narrowed at least quantitatively. But this advance too has remained on the periphery of development economics.<sup>13</sup>

This advance remains to be incorporated in the measurement tools used by development economics. When this would be done, the per capita levels of GDP as well as of the stock of capital (both physical and social) would be considerably higher than their current estimates.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, we should consider one more aspect of social technology in determining the distribution of income, wealth, and economic (and social and political) power. Current estimates on such distribution do not take into account the actual increments that an adequate coverage of social technology would make to the totals of GDP, and to the stock and additions to the stock of reproducible productive wealth. Both these totals will indeed be higher when account is taken of the income and the productive wealth generated by social technology

A 'back of the envelope' type of quick calculation suggests that the imputed capital value of trained workforce in the United States and Canada would be higher than the value of the entire stock of reproducible productive capital in these countries. Clearly, social technology is beginning to outstrip physical technology as a motive force of economic and social advance. Even in the third world countries, social technology must now be regarded as a major factor in development.

There is another special aspect which should be stressed here. It concerns the role of social technology as an instrument of empowerment. An adequate coverage of social technology would tend to raise the current estimates of GDP and wealth. Such new estimates would then reflect income and wealth related not only to property ownership in the conventional sense of the term but also social technology embodied in individuals. If it is assumed that the embodiment of social technology in individuals is spread more evenly than ownership of productive assets—a not unreasonable assumption—it would follow that the faster growth and wider spread of social technology in recent decades would work towards showing an improvement in the distribution of income.

Much more significant will be the influence of such a revised measurement on the distribution of productive wealth. The addition of the estimates of human capital to national productive assets would raise the total of the stock. It would also show an improvement in its distribution, since the ownership of human capital can, reflecting current levels of educational advance, be assumed to be much more widely and equitably distributed than that of physical assets. Moreover, human capital is more mobile, since it can move with the individual in which it is embodied.

These hypotheses need to be empirically tested. If they prove correct, we may find in social technology a very strong instrument of economic and social empowerment of the several disadvantaged sectors of society. Universalisation of health and education and their democratisation would thereby act as the most powerful tool for improving the distribution of income, wealth, and economic power. This does not, of course, mean that ownership of productive assets is not important. But it does mean that we now have an additional tool for reforming the system of inequitable distribution of income, wealth and economic power.

We have described above several considerations underlining the significance of social technology. Many of them make its measurement a very complex task. No account of technological transformation can be complete without as a minimum considering developments in social technology. It is not possible at present to measure the precise impacts of these developments. But we must at least underline that the transfor-

mation of societies cannot be explained by capital alone, and that the advances in social technology must also be drawn upon.

## Notes

- 1 'Enough has been said about theory of wealth-getting; we will now proceed to the practical part!' Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, Chapter 11, para 1.
- 2 Harrod, R F, 'An Essay in Dynamic Theory', *The Economic Journal*, Vol XLIX, 1939.
- 3 United Nations, Report of the Expert Group, *Measure for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries*, New York, 1951.
- 4 The literature on this subject is very large. For early contributions, see Abramovitz, Moses, *Resource and Output Trends in the United States since 1870*, Occasional Paper No 52, National Bureau of Economic Research New York, 1956; Solow, Robert, 'Technical Change and the Aggregate Production Function', *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Vol 39, August 1956, pp 312-20; Denison, Edward F, *The Sources of Economic Growth in the United States, and the Alternatives before Us*, Supplementary Paper No 13, Committee for Economic Development, New York, 1962; for Norway, see Aukrust, Odd, and Juul Bjerke, 'Real Capital and Economic Growth in Norway, 1900-56' in R Goldsmith and Ch Saunders, eds, *Income and Wealth*, Series VIII, London, 1959.
- 5 Schultz, T W, 'Investment in Human Capital', presidential address to the American Economic Association, reprinted in the *American Economic Review*, Vol 51, 1961, pp 1-17; see also Majumdar, Tapas, *Investment in Education and Social Choice*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- 6 Kuznets, S S, *Modern Economic Growth: Rate, Structure and Spread*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn, 1966, pp 80-81.
- 7 Bernal, J D, *Science in History*, Penguin Books, 1965, p 17.
- 8 Kuznets, op cit.
- 9 Schultz, op cit.
- 10 Kuznets, S S, *Aspects of Post-War II Growth in Less Developed Countries*, Discussion Paper No 234, Economic Growth Center, Yale University, 1975. He was referring to 'the impressively high' growth rates in the developing countries, and wondering with a sense of bewilderment that the flow of news about these countries concentrated only on 'critical conditions with respect to supplies of economic goods' rather than on the 'economic miracle' of high growth rates.
- 11 Studies on reverse transfer of technology or 'brain drain'; for instance, UNCTAD, *The Reverse Transfer of Technology: A Survey of its Main Features, Causes and Policy Implications*, (United Nations Publication, Sales No E 79, II D 10).
- 12 Patel, Mahesh S, *Eliminating Social Distance between North and South: Cost-Effective Goals for the 1990s*, UNICEF Staff Working Paper No 5, New York, October 1989.
- 13 Patel, Surendra J, 'Educational Distance between Nations: Its Origin and Prospects',

*The Indian Economic Journal*, Vol XIII, No 1, July-September 1965; 'Educational 'Miracle' in the Third World', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XX, No 31, August 3, 1985 and Razyoi/*Development International*, Vol 1, No 1, Zagreb, 1986; The Swift Narrowing of the Educational Distance between the Developed Countries and the Third World: 1950 to 1981', *Journal of Higher Education*, University Grants Commission, New Delhi, India, Vol 10, No 3, Spring 1985.

- 14 Several measurements covering facets of our concept of social technology have already been made. See, for instance, the pioneering works of Fritz Machlup, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N J 1962; and *The Economics of Information and Human Capital*, and the third volume of *Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N J, 1984. Machiup's conclusions were recently updated by Michael Rogers Rubin and Mary Taylor Huber in *The Knowledge Industry in the United States; 1960-1980*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1986.

Fifteen years after Machiup's pioneering study, a nine-volume report was published by the US department of commerce in 1977, dealing with 'information'. It ran on parallel lines, but used more conventional methods of measurement based on national income accounts. See Porat, Marc U and Michael R Rubin, *The Information Economy*, 9 vols, Government Printing Office, Washington, D C, 1977. It estimated that the primary information sector accounted in 1967 for 25.1 per cent of US GNP, and the secondary information sector for 21.1 per cent. Machiup's estimates for the knowledge sector were 28.6 per cent in 1958 and 31.0 per cent in 1963 for his concept of 'adjusted' GNP. The OECD published in 1981 studies of its member nations under the title *Information Activities* (Paris, 1981), which ran on lines parallel to the 1977 studies by the US department of commerce.

# Religion as a Subject for Sociology

Andre Beteille

*The sociological study of religion brings sharply into focus certain interesting questions of approach and method and a discussion of these is of wider interest in the study of society as a whole, including the study of such subjects as class, gender, nation, and, more generally, politics. There is, in particular, the issue of the comparative advantages of approaches that favour detachment, objectivity and value-neutrality as against those that favour commitment, engagement and partisanship.*

## I

I WOULD like to use the present occasion to discuss the sociological approach to the study of religion. My purpose will be not so much to present the principal findings established by the sociology of religion as to examine the subject from the point of view of method. I believe that the sociological study of religion brings sharply into focus certain interesting questions of approach and method, and that a discussion of these may be of wider interest in the study of society as a whole, including the study of such subjects as class, gender, nation, and, more generally, politics. I have in mind particularly the comparative advantages of approaches that favour detachment, objectivity and value-neutrality as against those that favour commitment, engagement and partisanship.

We cannot take it for granted that simply because religion exists, it will be considered a suitable subject for sociology by all concerned. Some proponents of the materialist interpretation of history might treat it lightly on the ground that it can tell us little about the basic and hard realities of economic and political life; or, they might take it into account only insofar as it is implicated in politics, say, in the form of communalism. But others might deny a claim on it not because they consider religion unimportant but because they consider it too important a subject for sociology; that is sometimes the case in societies governed by a strong religious authority.

I have spoken of the sociological approach to the study of religion in the singular, but one can easily point out that there are several such approaches and not just one approach. I would not like to narrow the scope of the discussion unduly, and would like, moreover, to take into account the works not only of sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber but also of social anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard.

There are many differences among the scholars who work within the field of the sociology of religion. One has only to mention together the names of Durkheim and Weber, the two most prominent figures in the field, to be reminded of these differences. The field has, moreover, expanded enormously since their time, and, with this ex-

pansion, further differentiation has come into being. Some scholars have devoted themselves to the study of 'world religions' such as Christianity, Hinduism and Islam;<sup>1</sup> others have studied religion among the simplest communities of hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and shifting cultivators.<sup>2</sup> There have been evolutionists, functionalists, structuralists and many others among the sociologists who have undertaken the study of religion. Nevertheless, certain common elements of approach and method are taken for granted when religion is made a subject for sociology. These common elements stand out when we compare the sociological study of religion with the study of it in other branches of learning.

## II

Religion has been a subject of study and reflection for a very long time. The sociology of religion is, by contrast, a very young subject; or, if one prefers, a young branch of an old subject. It is necessary to stress the diversity of approaches to the study of religion in order to highlight the distinctive features of the sociological approach to it.

The oldest branch of study devoted to religion, and at least in the Christian tradition by far the most important one for many centuries, is theology. Divinity schools occupied a prominent place in medieval European universities such as Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, and continued to do so until recent times. Theological studies have occupied an important place also in the Judaic and Islamic intellectual traditions. The theological approach has undergone important changes in the present century, particularly in the west, but it still retains a certain identity, and, in its pure form, it presents the sharpest possible contrast to the sociological approach to the study of religion.

Then, there is the philosophy of religion which now occupies some of the ground held previously by theology. The philosophy of religion looks to theology on one side and the psychology of religion on the other. We have also the very broad and assorted body of work that carries the label of the history of religions.<sup>3</sup> We come finally to the anthropological and sociological approaches to the study of the subject; although they are treated separately by some, I will in what

follows treat the two together.

In drawing attention to the varieties of approaches to the study of religion, it is not my intention to argue that there are or should be rigid boundaries between disciplines. Such boundaries do not exist, and are neither necessary nor desirable. David Hume, who wrote incisively on religion,<sup>4</sup> was not only a celebrated philosopher but also an historian. His contemporary and friend, Edward Gibbon wrote about religion mainly as an historian,<sup>5</sup> but what he wrote is permeated by philosophical and, indeed, sociological insight. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James is a landmark both in the philosophy and in the psychology of religion.<sup>6</sup> Such examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely.

It is easy enough to arrange the various approaches on a continuum in such a way that one can pass from one approach to the next without any clear or noticeable break. But it is necessary also to make distinctions. I would like to begin with the distinction between normative and empirical—or, if one prefers, judgmental and non-judgmental—approaches to religious phenomena. The theologian is concerned primarily with questions of truth and rectitude in religious beliefs and practices. Questions of truth and rectitude do not concern the sociologist in the same way; his primary concern is to observe, describe, interpret and explain the manner in which religious beliefs and practices operate. An important question from the viewpoint of method, to which I will return later, is how deeply it is necessary to be concerned with questions of truth and rectitude if one is interested in the description and analysis of religious beliefs and practices. The same question arises with regard to other systems of belief and practice, and the answers that we give to it must be consistent from one domain to another.

The distinction between the normative and the empirical orientations comes out most clearly in the contrast between the theological and the sociological approaches to the study of religion. It is no accident that, historically, the sociological approach came into its own with the decline of the theological approach. So long as the study of religion was governed by religious faith, there could be little room in it for sociology.

The sociology of religion may in this sense be regarded as the offspring of religious scepticism and agnosticism, if not of atheism.

In a symposium on sacrifice, conducted jointly by anthropologists and theologians, the Jesuit priest M F C Bourdillon put it thus, "When an anthropologist studies the moral values of a culture or a society, his aim is to try to understand them independently of the values of his own or any other culture... It is, on the other hand, extremely rare to find a Christian theologian who does not hold that his discipline is concerned with ideals for living."<sup>7</sup> The atmosphere of religious discussion, particularly in the Christian world, has altered enormously between the end of the last century and the end of the present, so that theologians and social theorists are more prepared to learn from, or at least to listen to, each other. But this should not lead us to obliterate the distinction between an orientation to the subject that is grounded in religious scepticism and one that is grounded in religious faith. This distinction was presented sharply from the viewpoint of religious scepticism by Meyer Fortes, one of the two editors of the symposium volume.<sup>8</sup>

There are two important features of the sociological approach on which I would like to make a few observations; both features are common to sociology and social anthropology. The first is the extensive use of the comparative method; and the second is the investigation of religious beliefs, practices and institutions in relation to other aspects of society and culture.

The comparative method is central to the discipline of sociology and, as such, to the sociology of religion. As Emile Durkheim, one of the key figures in the subject, wrote, "Comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself!"<sup>9</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, who was a follower of Durkheim, spoke of social anthropology as comparative sociology. This of course does not mean that sociologists devote themselves only to comparisons between different religious systems. In fact, most sociologists and social anthropologists spend most of their time in making detailed studies of particular religions, and both Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown are best known for their case studies, of the Australian Aborigines by the first and the Andaman Islanders by the second.<sup>10</sup> But the case studies do not stand by themselves; they derive their significance from the comparative perspective that is characteristic of the discipline as a whole.

Both Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown believed that the application of the comparative method would enable them to discover general laws about society and its institutions, including its religious institutions. They believed that sociology and social anthropology could be developed in the manner of the natural sciences. Their strategy was to proceed in a systematic way through observation, description and com-

parison to generalisation.<sup>11</sup> We now have as a result a large body of data on religious beliefs and practices from all parts of the world.

The accumulation of a large body of systematic data from the different parts of the world has certainly advanced our knowledge and understanding of religion, but it has not led to the discovery of the kind of general laws that Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown had hoped to discover. What then is left of the comparative method? The comparative method remains of great value because it forces a certain discipline that does not come naturally to us when we examine the varieties of social life. It forces us to give equal consideration, at least in certain respects and for certain purposes, to all societies irrespective of our personal engagements. In that sense, the comparative method brings all societies on a level with each other; it does not admit of any privileged exceptions. This goes against our ingrained habits of mind when we are dealing with human societies, and particularly when our subject of study is religion. If fair-mindedness is a virtue in the study of society and culture, then the comparative method is an indispensable aid in the cultivation of that virtue.

We have to distinguish between the aspirations of the comparative method and its achievements. Where individual or collective biases were thrown out by the front door, they sometimes crept in through the back door. For Durkheim and his generation, the comparative method went hand in hand with a belief in the theory of evolution. Hence, while all religions might be investigated by the same method, some were regarded as more evolved or more elevated than others. Weber too differentiated among religions according to their degree of rationalisation, placing primitive magical practices at one end and Protestant Christianity at the other. Evolutionary theories are no longer as popular as in the past, but this does not mean that personal or ethnocentric bias has been completely eliminated from the sociological study of religion.

Theology stands at the opposite end from sociology in its orientation to the plurality of religions. At least in its classical form, its concern was with a particular religion which it singled out for special attention: there was thus Christian theology—and within it Protestant theology and Catholic theology—or Judaic theology or Islamic theology. Theology will defeat its original purpose if it places all religions on the same plane, for that purpose was to establish the truth of one religion and expose the errors of others. The theologian writes about religion from within; it is difficult to think of a Christian who is an Islamic theologian or a Hindu who is a Christian theologian. Again, as Bourdillon has put it, "Theologians are part of the tradition they study, and must be convinced that their rituals have the effects that they want them to have."<sup>12</sup> The sociologist,

on the other hand, approaches religions from the outside even when he seeks to understand their inner meaning.

A second important feature of the sociological approach is that it studies the facts of religion in association with other social facts. The sociological approach, as I understand it, not only does not privilege one's own religion as against other religions, it does not privilege the religious domain among the various domains of social life. In the sociological perspective, no matter how important the religious life may be in itself, it cannot be made fully intelligible without being brought into relationship with domestic life, economic life and political life. The interconnections among the different institutional domains is at the centre of sociological attention.

The position is different for the theologian. For him, the religious domain is pre-eminent, in a way the only one that has real significance. He is concerned, above all, with the inner meaning of religion rather than its external or institutional manifestation which is what engages the attention of the sociologist. This does not mean that there can be no collaboration between the theologian and the sociologist, which there has been, with very fruitful results as in the case of Ernst Troeltsch the theologian and Max Weber the sociologist.<sup>13</sup> That collaboration deserves attention, for it brings to light not only the differences of perspective, but also the possibility of a reciprocity of perspectives.

Although their intellectual interests overlapped, Weber stressed the differences in orientation between himself and Troeltsch. Despite his considerable erudition in matters relating to Christian doctrine, he spoke of himself as a non-expert working at second-hand, and of Troeltsch as the expert best equipped to provide an authoritative view.<sup>14</sup> But he obviously believed that the 'non-expert' had an important part to play in clarifying the relationship of religion to economy and society, and in examining that relationship comparatively. He probably felt that, as a sociologist, he could deal better with non-Christian religions than Troeltsch whose expertise lay in the field of Christian theology.<sup>15</sup>

Weber also took an interest in the practical side of religion through his association with the Evangelical-Social Congress. He gave freely of his time and counsel to Pastor Naumann who believed that in Germany the reform of religion could not succeed without the reform of politics, and in particular the incorporation of the working class to full citizenship. What these relationships bring out is that there are not only many kinds of sociologists but also many kinds of theologians. Not all sociologists are militant atheists or ostentatiously irreligious, and Weber certainly was neither. Nor are all theologians intransigent dogmatists, concerned only with the letter of the creed, and, indeed, Troeltsch, who was a liberal from the beginning, moved in mid-career and on his

own choice from a chair in theology to one in philosophy. The point is not that no sociologist can be a religious believer and no theologian a religious skeptic, but that there are characteristic differences of orientation between sociology and theology as disciplines.

Sociological studies of religious beliefs, practices and institutions vary enormously in scope and emphasis. Some are based on the analysis of literary materials relating to large populations over long stretches of time; others are based on direct observation of life in small communities. Some deal mainly with religious phenomena; others deal with them only insofar as they bear upon some other aspect of life which is the primary object of attention. There are studies of the religious life of natural communities such as the village or the tribe, and studies of specifically religious associations such as the church or the sect.

A good example of the sociological approach is the study of religion and society among the Coorgs of South India by M N Srinivas.<sup>16</sup> The principal objective of the book is to give a coherent account of a system of religious beliefs and practices in its social context. As such, it begins with an outline of social structure and then proceeds to give an account of the ritual idiom of the Coorgs. The central part of the book deals with cults of the various social units, such as household, village and region, which constitute the principal components of Coorg social structure. The book concludes with some general observations on the relationship between religion and society.

Srinivas later elaborated the distinction between the 'book-view' and the 'field-view' of society, in terms of that distinction, his work on the Coorgs gives us a field-view of Hinduism. There are innumerable accounts in the ancient, medieval and modern literature of Hinduism that tell us how religious institutions ought to work. Srinivas was less interested in discussing how they ought to work than in showing how they actually work. Such an account might be of considerable interest to a theologian, but it is not one that the typical theologian would himself write.

In studying religion, the sociologist or social anthropologist tries to observe and describe how people act as well as to understand and interpret the meanings they assign to their acts. There are important differences of emphasis here. Durkheim, for instance, believed in attending first and foremost to the external, observable characteristics of social facts before attending to their inner meanings. In much the same vein, Radcliffe-Brown wrote in his Foreword to the book by Srinivas, "Social anthropology is behaviouristic in the sense that we seek to observe how people act as a necessary preliminary to trying to understand how they think and feel."<sup>17</sup>

Others have placed their emphasis elsewhere. For Weber, it was always important to enquire into the meaning the actor assign-

ed to his action in every sphere of society: what did it mean for the priest or the prophet to choose and pursue a particular way of life? And, beyond that, what meaning did the world itself have from the viewpoint of a given religion? At the same time, Weber never neglected to compare and contrast, with the maximum possible detachment, the answers given to this question in different religious traditions. He also examined systematically and with the greatest possible care the material and other external conditions associated with various religious beliefs and practices.

Collaboration between sociologists and theologians has never been free from problems since it is never very easy to reconcile the committed and the detached points of view. Among radical social theorists, Durkheim has been represented as a conservative who assigned too much importance to religion. It is true that Durkheim assigned great importance to religion in social life and rebuked his empiricist colleagues, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, for treating it lightly. But for Durkheim, religion is important not because it is true but because it is useful, whereas for the theologian, the importance of religion lies in its truth and not in its utility.

The Catholic church in France viewed Durkheim's work quite differently from the way in which it has come to be viewed among sociologists. His book was attacked in a long review article by Gaston Richard, entitled 'Dogmatic Atheism in the Sociology of Religion'. Richard maintained, "In the end, it is incontrovertible that this sociology of religion (*soaologie neligieuse*), as it is called, is incompatible not only with Christian faith, but even with philosophical theism, and indeed with any belief that recognises, hypothetically at least, a divine personality!"<sup>18</sup> Gaston Richard was not a theologian, but had begun his career as a member of Durkheim's *Annee sociologique* circle. He was, however, a believing Christian who, though born in a Catholic family, had converted to the Protestant faith. Many years later, a similar attack against Durkheim's sociology of religion was launched by another former admirer, E E Evans-Pritchard. Evans-Pritchard had in his religious life travelled the same road as Gaston Richard, but in the opposite direction; his father was a minister of the Protestant church, but he had found his faith by embracing Catholicism.

One of the arguments of both Richard and Evans-Pritchard was that Durkheim had overreached himself, that he was claiming too much for his sociology of religion. Evans-Pritchard, himself the author of one of the finest anthropological monographs on religion, addressed himself to this very difficult question at the end of his book. After describing what the social anthropologist is able to observe and how far he is able to proceed towards an understanding of the inner meaning of what he observes, he concluded, "At this point the theologian

takes over from the anthropologist!"<sup>19</sup>

But Evans-Pritchard did not rest content for very long with the division of labour that he seemed to be proposing between anthropology and theology at the end of his book on Nuer religion. With the passage of time, he became increasingly sceptical about the contribution that social anthropology and sociology could make to the understanding of religion. In his Aquinas lecture, delivered before a Catholic audience, he launched an attack on anthropological studies of religion, accusing their authors of bad faith.<sup>20</sup> A little later, he repeated the same attack on sociological theories of religion, accusing Durkheim of having roughly the same perspective on religion as Marx and Engels.<sup>21</sup>

Evans-Pritchard's later writings on religion reveal a very great anthropologist in a very poor light. I allude to them not out of ill-will, but in order to suggest that there might be a possible connection between his increasing attachment to the Catholic faith and his growing disaffection with the sociology of religion. His own early essay, 'Zande Theology' of 1936 was a masterly demonstration of how such a meticulous observer as the Dominican priest, Mgr Lagae had arranged his ethnographic facts to fit a theologically convenient argument, creating a religious doctrine where none existed.<sup>22</sup> He had begun from the position that social anthropologists and sociologists must not claim that they can tell us everything about religion; in course of time, he found such claims as they were making to be increasingly intolerable; in the end, he came very close to the position that they can tell us nothing about religion in the true sense of the term, or at least nothing of any real value.

The sociology of religion always, and perhaps necessarily, comes to grief when it moves beyond its proper empirical concerns under the urge to decide on the truth or otherwise of a religious doctrine. Whether or not Ram was the ideal man; whether Mohammed was a true or a false prophet; and whether Christ died in vain or for the redemption of humankind are questions that are beyond the purview of the sociology of religion in the sense given to it here. But that does not mean that it has nothing of interest to say about the place of religion in man's social life.

### III

I now return to Max Weber and, in the light of his work, make some general observations on approach and method in social enquiry. It is Max Weber's sociology of religion, more than anyone else's, that has lessons to offer for sociology as a whole from the viewpoint of method.

There is something paradoxical about the life and work of Max Weber, his concern with meaning and understanding on the one hand, and with objectivity and value-neutrality on the other. Weber had very little patience for the kind of natural science of

society that fascinated Durkheim; he argued untiringly for an interpretive sociology. He produced an enormous body of work on religion; yet he declared that he was "absolutely unmusical religiously".<sup>23</sup> Surely, it is not unreasonable to ask of a proponent of interpretive sociology how far a person who is religiously unmusical can go in the interpretation of religion?

No one who declares himself to be religiously unmusical can possibly claim that he understands the whole of religion. But is it necessary for the sociologist of religion to make such a claim? That kind of claim will be made only by those who maintain that we must first grasp the whole—or the totality—if we are to understand any of its parts. Weber, it seems to me, would be deeply mistrustful of such a claim. Most persons in fact understand some bits of life, but few would claim that they understand the whole of its inner meaning.

Weber's account of himself as "Absolutely unmusical religiously" has to be seen in the light of the stand that he took on objectivity and value-neutrality. Value-neutrality in the study of religion does not mean of course that one ignores the part played by values in social life; that would be quite contrary to the spirit of interpretive sociology. It only means that it should be possible, at least in principle, to understand religious institutions, religious beliefs and religious practices from the outside, without becoming personally committed to the values by which they are sustained within a given religious faith. The understanding and interpretation of, for example, Islamic, or Hindu, or Christian institutions does not require any moral commitment to the values of Islam or Hinduism or Christianity. Or, as Weber might put it, "One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar".<sup>24</sup>

Most contemporary social theorists would probably agree that one does not have to adhere to the tenets of a particular religion in order to understand the institutions of that religion: the work of Max Weber stands as a living testimony to that. Indeed, they would probably recommend a healthy dose of religious scepticism and detachment to those who would make religion a subject of sociology. The problem today does not lie there, but elsewhere. If it is possible to understand and interpret religious beliefs and practices while being 'religiously unmusical', is it also possible to understand and interpret political processes and institutions while being 'politically unmusical'? The great debates in social theory that divide those who subscribe to objectivity, detachment and value-neutrality from those who recommend commitment, engagement and partisanship are today not about religion but about politics. At the same time, the lessons that social theorists learn from the study of religion cannot be altogether without value for the study of politics.

No matter what sociologists might agree to about the study of religion, many of them

would question the advantage to be derived from objectivity, detachment and value-neutrality in the study of such secular subjects as class, gender and nation. They would say that it is only through commitment to a specific set of moral values—and even a specific political project—that true insight into these problems can be attained. Commitment, according to their argument, is desirable not only from the moral and political, but also from the intellectual point of view. The attempt to separate 'methodology' from 'ideology',<sup>25</sup> they would say, is both disingenuous and self-defeating.

The theoretical foundations of the argument for commitment in social enquiry are to be found in the writings of Marx<sup>26</sup> and certain Marxists, such as Lukacs,<sup>27</sup> Korsch<sup>28</sup> and Gramsci,<sup>29</sup> particularly in regard to the study of class. In all these writings, a kind of privileged place is assigned to the 'viewpoint of the proletariat'. The position adopted there is that other representations of bourgeois society are incomplete and, hence, distorted and false; only the viewpoint of the proletariat provides access to a complete and, hence, historically true picture of reality.

In an influential essay designed to demolish the foundations of 'value-free' social science, Lukacs put forward the case for a method whose central proposition was the unity of theory and practice.<sup>30</sup> Similar arguments were put forward at about the same time by Korsch, Gramsci and others.<sup>31</sup> Their approach offered new insights into class structure, consciousness and ideology, politics and a host of other subjects. More than that, they put many of the proponents of a value-free sociology on the defensive with their far-reaching claims about what could be achieved, both theoretically and practically, by the method they advocated.

Lukacs and others have maintained that there is no way in which true understanding of social processes can be reached through an insight into the totality, an insight that comes, moreover, only when theory is combined with practice. Sociologists and social anthropologists have learnt to be wary of that kind of claim in regard to the understanding of religion. Why should they yield to its temptations in regard to the understanding of politics?

It can of course be said that in the modern world, politics is altogether different from religion insofar as no one can remain truly indifferent to the demands of politics whereas it is possible, and sometimes even desirable to distance oneself from religion, although that point of view will hardly find favour with the theologian. The attack on detachment, objectivity and value-neutrality has often been made on the ground that the claims of their proponents are disingenuous since it is impossible in reality to be wholly neutral on fundamental political questions, and, therefore, those who profess to be so are in fact promoting a particular cause or a particular interest under the cover of

neutrality. At the same time, I remain unconvinced that it is in principle either easier or more desirable to seek neutrality on matters of religious faith than on matters of political ideology.

It is undoubtedly the case that neutrality does not come naturally or effortlessly to us in the understanding and interpretation of our own beliefs, practices and institutions. Therefore to require or expect the investigator to treat social facts as things' might indeed appear somewhat disingenuous. But that does not mean that the effort itself to achieve neutrality is misconceived. And if my argument is right, it is here that the sociology of politics of the nation, class and gender may have something to learn from the sociology of religion.

There are two lessons in particular to which I would like to draw attention in conclusion. The first is that value-neutrality, no matter how desirable in principle, is very difficult to achieve in practice, what is achieved being always incomplete. The exponents of value-neutrality do not all assert that the separation of fact and value is easy to maintain in a consistent way; some do and others do not. Here there appears to be a fundamental difference between what, for want of better terms, I will call 'scientific' sociology as against interpretive sociology. The exponents of the former, among whom we may include Durkheim, or at least the author of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, tend to treat the problem lightly and to suggest that anyone can solve it provided he has the right

'method'. But the exponents of interpretive sociology do not in general take that view. They do not suggest that there is any simple recipe for success in the task which they rather see as being constantly at risk. Max Weber raised and answered the general question as follows: "Nor need I discuss further whether the distinction between empirical statements of fact and value-judgments is •difficult' to make. It is."<sup>32</sup>

Not only is the practice of detachment, objectivity and value-neutrality difficult, but those who undertake it never achieve complete success in their endeavour. This is true no less in regard to politics than it is in regard to religion. It makes the proponents of value-neutrality permanently vulnerable to allegations of bad faith and duplicity. But failure to achieve complete success in practice cannot be a compelling reason for discarding a principle. Here I will quote what Maxime Rodinson, at one time a leading Marxist intellectual, wrote at the end of his celebrated biography of the Prophet Mohammed: "But even if pure objectivity is unattainable, it would be a sophism to suggest that it was necessary instead to be deliberately partial!"<sup>33</sup> To me it does not seem accidental that a Marxist chose to be objective rather than partial when he made religion the subject of his study; but Rodinson was an exception, and not very typical of his generation of Marxists.

The second lesson that we learn from the sociology of religion is that sociology cannot provide a complete picture of the world as a whole in terms of either fact or value. Here again, sociology stands at the opposite end from theology, at least in its classical form. It is constantly at odds with all those who represent the world as a unity and maintain that there is a single key, within their reach if not in their grasp, to both understanding and action. As we have seen, sociology can say something about religious beliefs, practices and institutions in different places at different times, but very little, if anything, as to whether it is better to be a Hindu, a Muslim or a Christian, a believer or an unbeliever. Likewise, it can say something about political processes and institutions, but very little of practical utility as to whether it is better to be a liberal, a conservative or a radical in politics. These latter questions may be the most important ones for a particular individual at a particular point of time, but there is no social theory that can tell him which is the best political ideology just as there is none that can tell him which is the best religious faith.

I would not like my argument to be construed to mean that a Catholic or a Communist cannot be a sociologist or that he can at best be a poor one.<sup>34</sup> A Catholic may indeed have certain advantages when he studies religion and a Communist when he studies politics, but it is necessary to point out that these advantages can be easily abused. It is not unlikely that those who have direct experience of religion and politics have

a certain advantage, at least initially, in making sense of symbols and processes that are not immediately accessible to the external observer. But religion, politics and other aspects of social life are not merely matters of experience, they are also subjects of doctrine. A doctrine is not always the best guide to experience and may indeed be an obstacle to it.

Evans-Pritchard had reason to castigate his predecessors to the extent that they, or at least some of them, appear to have decided in advance that all religions are equally false, for one might say that that too is a doctrine. But the matter does not rest there, for it is both complex and delicate. What really disturbed Evans-Pritchard was the relativism that followed from the successes of comparative studies of language, myth and religion. "This pointed to a relativism in which Christianity was not the one true faith but just one religion among others, all equally false."<sup>35</sup> He paid a back-handed compliment to Max Mueller for treading warily on that ground, presumably because he did not wish to fall foul of the Bishop of Gloucester who had already condemned attempts to put into competition the sacred books of India and the Holy Scriptures' "<sup>36</sup>

It should now be clear why I regard the matter to be both complex and delicate. While no one can hope to understand the meaning and significance of a religious belief or practice unless he approaches his subject with concern and sympathy, it is never very easy to decide how much of the concern and sympathy is due to the desire for understanding and how much of it to the fear of a bishop or some other religious authority. Parallels will not be difficult to find from the domain of politics. While studies of, say, the nation or the working class undoubtedly benefit from a sympathetic concern for the subject, it sometimes happens that the concern and the sympathy are mainly concessions to the demands of the state and the party.

Being religiously unmusical is not the same thing as being hostile or even unsympathetic to religion; being sceptical about the historical mission of the proletariat (or of oppressed minorities) need not deprive one of the capacity for concern and sympathy for their predicament. But sympathy and concern need not lead to the adoption of any particular doctrine in either religion or politics. Again, if one asks if it is easy to combine sympathy and concern for one's subject with detachment and objectivity, the answer is that it is not.

The demand for objectivity in the social sciences is most typically made in the name of intellectual rigour. To treat social facts as things is to place oneself on the same footing with them that the physicist or the biologist secures with respect to the facts that he or she investigates. Here objectivity is viewed as the separability of the investigator from the object of investigation, and the clearer the separation, the greater the presumed gain

for intellectual rigour. But the facts of religion and politics are different, and have to be treated differently from the material facts investigated by the physicist or the biologist. In dealing with them, as in dealing with human beings generally, we have to be governed by considerations not merely of intellectual rigour but also of fairness.

The virtue of defining objectivity as fairness is most manifest in the comparative study of religion. The Catholic anthropologist has a right to demand of a person who studies Catholicism that he should approach his subject with respect; but he spoils his case by being peevish in the face of attempts to deal even-handedly with the Geeta and the Bible.

Without any prejudice to what is due to rigour and precision, I would like to stress the perennial need in social enquiry for objectivity as fairness. It is this need for fairness in presenting, or at least taking into account, different points of view that gives to social enquiry its distinctive character. The hardest part of self-discipline in social enquiry is that which is due to the demand for fairness. For it is not simply that the same subject appears different when observed from different points of view, but, further, that the viewpoint of the observer must be constantly matched with that of the actor. The sociologist can at best bring these various points of view into the open, and present the case for each one of them to the best of his ability. He can be candid about his own values; but he cannot set himself up as a judge where questions of ultimate value, those of his subjects as well as of other observers, are at issues.

#### Notes

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- 1 Max Weber is the most notable exponent. Apart from his well known *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930), there are *The Religion of China* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), *Ancient Judaism* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952), and *The Religion of India* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958).
- 2 A R Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1922; E E Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- 3 This approach is well represented in the journal, *History of Religions*, published by the University of Chicago Press; see also Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 2 vols.
- 4 David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957; *Discourses Concerning Natural Religion*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1980.

- 5 Edward Gibbon, *A History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London: Dent, 1910, especially vol 2.
- 6 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Macmillan, 1961.
- 7 M F C Bourdillon and M Fortes (eds), *Sacrifice*, London: Academic Books, 1980, p 4.
- 8 Ibid, pp v-xix.
- 9 Emik Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p 157.
- 10 Ifedctiffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, n 2; Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1915.
- 11 Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, n 9; Raddifte-Brown, *A Natural Science of Society*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957.
- 12 Bourdillon and Fortes (eds), *Sacrifice*, n 7, p 6.
- 13 Wolfgang J Mommsen and Jurgen Osterhammel (eds), *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1987, chapter 15; see also Marianne Weber, *Max Weber A Biography*, New York: John Wiley, 1975.
- 14 Mommsen and Osterhammel (eds), *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, n 13, p 221.
- 15 Marianne Weber, *Max Weber*, p 13, p 331.
- 16 M N Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.
- 17 Radcliffe-Brown, 'Foreword' in Srinivas, *Religion and Society*, n 16, p vii.
- 18 Gaston Richard, 'Dogmatic Atheism in the Sociology of Religion' in W E S Pickering (ed), *Durkheim on Religion*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, p 229.
- 19 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, n 2, p 322.
- 20 Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, pp 29-45.
- 21 Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, chapter 3.
- 22 Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology*, n 20, pp 162-203.
- 23 In a letter dated February 19, 1909, quoted in Marianne Weber, *Max Weber*, n 13, p 324, he wrote, "It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither anti-religious nor irreligious".
- 24 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, vol 1, p 5.
- 25 Here I use the term 'ideology' in a broad sense; for an attempt to give the term a more precise meaning, see A Beteille, 'Ideologies: Commitment and Partisanship', *VHomme*, vol 17, nos 3-4, 1978, pp 47-67.
- 26 The most famous expression of this view is in 'The Theses on Feuerbach', written by Marx in 1845, first published by Engels in an edited form in 1888, and now available in various editions.
- 27 G Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, London: Merlin Press, 1971.
- 28 K Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, New York: MR, 1970.
- 29 A Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- 30 Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, n 27, particularly the first essay, 'What Is Orthodox Marxism?'
- 31 Outside of orthodox Marxism, but always sympathetic to it is Jean-Paul Sartre; *Search for a Method*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963.
- 32 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York: The Free Press, 1949, P 9.
- 33 Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, pp 312-3.
- 34 The argument has been made in the past that a Marxist cannot or even should not be a sociologist. See for instance, L Goldmann, 'Y a-t-il une sociologie marxiste?', *Us temps modernes*, no 140, October 1957. See also my 'Is There a Marxist Anthropology?' in A Beteille, *Essays in Comparative Sociology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- 35 Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology*, n 20, p 35.
- 36 Ibid.