

## Notes on approaches to the study of institutions in social anthropology: The case of India

*Anjan Ghosh*

Let me confess at the outset that this necessarily brief and synoptic presentation will ill correspond to the magnanimous title given to it. What I will try to do is to provide a particular narrative on the most well known Indian social institution viz. caste. The purpose is not to be comprehensive or definitive but to highlight the changing mores of interpreting caste. But before embarking on the specificities of my narrative it is in order to make some preliminary remarks on the ways of viewing institutions in social anthropology.

Social anthropology with its focus on the patterns and persistence of pre-capitalist social formations has ubiquitously been concerned with social institutions. Institutions like the family, marriage, kinship, taboos, rituals, kingship, shamanism, social stratification, exchange, etc. have often constituted the substantive aspects of social anthropological enquiry. Yet the ways of viewing institutions have changed considerably. Different theoretical vantage points have imparted new meanings and significances to existing institutions and the way they interrelate.

Initially institutions were viewed as congeries of relationships, constituting an element of the whole of society. They were perceived as need fulfilling and hence functionally integrated to maintain society. In such schemas social change was either manifest as evolution or as an extrinsic possibility. However, as the emphasis shifted from function to structure the notion of structure itself was transformed. From "a complex network of...actually existing...social relations" (Radcliffe-Brown) to the cultural codes embedded in the consciousness of people (Levi-Strauss), structure interacted differently with institutions. While in the former, structure was embodied in institutions, the latter understanding suggested that institutions were an outcome of structure.

Since then social anthropological theory has been greatly exercised over questions of "meaning" and "practice". As a hermeneutically inclined anthropologist has maintained, culture comprises "webs of significance" which man has spun and the task of the anthropologist is to interpret their meaning (Geertz). In a more materially grounded way Bourdieu has emphasized material and symbolic contexts as "habitus" for reproduction of societies. Referring to habitus a "the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves" (Bourdieu: 1977: 88). Hence institutions in the latter perspective were

perceived as sites of contest or struggle among contending forces and not simply as embodiments of power.

In a sense therefore, different theoretical vantage points have evolved variant understanding of institutions, even as the institutions themselves may have undergone change over time. My narrative will try to work at the intersection of these courses of change.

If civilization has existed for over five thousand years, as India has, it has to develop institutions. Yet the meaning of institutions have not been constant over time or even at a particular time in a highly stratified society like India. For example, the caste system has existed as a system of jatis from about the twelfth century when peasantization took place and the village economy stabilised. Yet there was nothing unchanging about the caste system. Jati-vyavastha (caste system) brought about an elaborate division of labour, considerable absorption of tribal communities, possibilities of social mobility through migration, colonization of virgin land or conquest and upgradation of status except perhaps at the two poles (Brahmin and Untouchables) along with not infrequent re-ordering of the local caste structure. The social recognition of rank based on purity and pollution was one of the aspects of the pre-colonial social structure, not the only one, and was articulated with kingship (power), trade and education, religiosity ("bhakti") and the tradition of renunciation (sannyas). Unlike what later colonial administrators made it out to be, caste was a form of social ordering but neither inflexible or immutable. That was brought about by the administrative codification of the British in the Census volumes thereby fixing caste positions and universally advertising it. Is it any wonder that the Census Commissioners were deluged with applications from caste associations seeking upgradation of status? For caste thus became a social label and source of collective identity. In pre-colonial India caste status rarely transgressed the boundaries of the "little kingdom". Colonialism brought about a different scale and form of government and an accompanying knowledge system. It had to "create" categories and concepts cognisable to its mode of knowing (empirically verifiable) and amenable to its mode of governance. Caste became a principal category within this framework and was supposed to correspond to the indigenous category of social order.

There, however, remained a hiatus. While an Indian recognised caste status for what it was within a larger complex of institutions, the British singled it out as the principal source of identity and classification among Indians, transforming a symbol into an index. Through the Census and the Tribes and Caste volumes, caste became a "gate-keeping" notion about India (Appadurai: 1986) effacing other elements of the social structure. The vocabulary of anthropological comparison caste thus epitomised particularism, immobility and heterogeneity, the characteristics of "tradition" as against the centralised division of labour and homogeneity of industrial capitalism or "modernity".

The point of this exercise in epistemic construction is to indicate how relations of power and domination structure our modes of knowledge about institutions. Consequently the choice of theoretical perspectives is also governed by this relationship of power and knowledge.

Social anthropological understanding of caste as an institution has become more enriched through the development of plural perspectives. The functionalist view of caste as a system of social stratification which helps to sustain order amidst the elaborate division of labour now has to contend with the structuralists emphasis on the cosmological idea of hierarchy based on purity and pollution as the principal underlying status ranking. Ethnosociological perspectives which try to reconstruct the insider's viewpoint has to fend with dissenting variants also from the inside. It is this contention and engagement between different frameworks that has given rise to a more nuanced understanding of caste. No longer can caste be considered an attribute manifest in behaviour, it is a more pervasive presence in the minds of men as the sensibility of hierarchy. Transgression of this sensibility invites violence, as has recently been witnessed in India over the issue of reservation for backward classes.

So what general conclusions can be drawn about the social anthropological approaches to institutions? Firstly that there is a difference between what is said and what is done. Institutions also have their hidden agendas. By focusing on a microcosmic reality anthropologists can distinguish between them. Further it contextualises actions in terms of their meaning for participants. Anthropological approaches are thus appropriate for recovering the episteme or epistemological field (Foucault) which constitutes a hidden mode of perception.

### **Selected References**

Appadurai, Arjun (1986): Theory in Anthropology: Centre and Periphery. Comparative Studies in Society and History, 28:2.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977): Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press.

Cohn, Bernard S. (1984): Census, Social Structure and Objectivation, in his An Anthropologist Among Historians, Delhi, Oxford University Press.

David, Kenneth (1977): The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia, The Hague, Mouton (World Anthropology Series).

Dumont, Louis (1972): Homo Hierarchicus, Paladian.

Foucault, Michel (1973): The Order of Things, New York, Vintage.

Geertz, Clifford (1973): Interpretation of Cultures, New York, Basic Books.

Mandelbaum, David (1970): Society in India, Bombay, Popular Prakashan.

Srinivas, M.N. (1962): Caste in Modern India and Other Essays, Bombay, Asia Publishing House.

Srinivas, M.N. (1966): Social Change in Modern India, Delhi, Orient Longmans.