

# Conceptualising the Concept of Community in Indian Social Science: An Anthropological Perspective

Carol Upadhya  
Post-Graduate Department of Sociology  
S.N.D.T. Women's University  
Mumbai-20

**Abstract :** While identity has become a major theme of research in international anthropology and sociology, within Indian sociology research on this issue has not progressed to the extent required given the contemporary political and social situation. This is due in part to lack of an adequate theoretical apparatus, and in part to the confusion caused by the interpenetration of sociological categories and concepts with those employed beyond the academy. This paper attempts to work towards a conceptual clarification of the issues pertaining to identity and community in India by drawing on some of the recent debates within social-cultural anthropology (especially American) that have arisen out of studies of ethnicity, nationalism, and identity politics in other contexts. Two major theoretical problems are discussed: the relation between sociological and non-sociological concepts of community and identity (such as those employed by the media or in political discourses), and the related issue of the politics of academic knowledge. The insights gained from reviewing this literature are then used to critically assess discussions of community and identity in the Indian context.

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Over the last decade or two, largely in response to the world-wide emergence of identity politics of various kinds -- ethnic conflicts, separatist movements, fundamentalism -- identity has become a major theme of research and debate within international anthropology and sociology.<sup>1</sup> While this interest has permeated Indian sociology as well, research along these lines here has not progressed to the extent required in the context of contemporary politics. In part this is due to lack of a theoretical apparatus within mainstream Indian sociology adequate to handle issues of identity, and in part to the immense confusion caused by the inter-penetration of sociological categories and concepts with those employed by leaders and activists of identitarian social movements. Therefore, before discussing the issue of contemporary discourses of identity and community, it is necessary to be very clear about our concepts and theoretical frame of reference. This paper is not about particular discourses of community or identity in India but about the concepts themselves. The objective is to raise some questions that should be kept in mind in any discussion of community or identity formation, but not to provide answers to those questions. To do this I draw on some of the recent debates surrounding issues of identity, ethnicity and nationalism within social-cultural anthropology (especially in the USA). The intention is to work towards a reframing of similar questions about community and identity in India, not by importing theoretical positions wholesale but by widening the context of the debate by comparison with examples taken from outside of India. Two major theoretical problems are discussed in this way: the relationship between sociological concepts of community and identity on the one hand, and the everyday conceptualisations employed in other contexts (e.g., in popular understandings, political and state discourses, and the media), on the other; and the related issue of the politics of academic knowledge.

### **Communities in the Indian sociological tradition**

In this section I outline two major conceptualisations of 'community' -- a traditional one and a more recent one -- within Indian sociology (and other disciplines), which I tentatively term the 'substantivist' and the 'constructivist'. I have formed these two broad categories somewhat artificially out of a range theoretical positions, and acknowledge that this procedure necessarily entails over-simplification of the existing literature. Also, I have not attempted a thorough review of the literature but have referred to a small section of it for the sake of illustration.

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<sup>1</sup>The immediate inspiration for this paper was a talk given recently at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, by Charles Taylor, the liberal political philosopher and guru of multiculturalism. In the context of his lecture on the challenge presented to democracy by demands from various groups and minorities for community-based rights or privileges, he ventured to make a few remarks about India in which he referred to the recent massacre in Bihar as 'inter-community' conflict. This kind of conceptualisation of diverse and complex situations of conflict as stemming from 'primordial' ties of community or ethnic/religious identity appears to have taken over mainstream discussions, both academic and popular, especially that of multiculturalism. A significant body of literature has appeared within anthropology which challenges such views, as discussed below.

## The substantivist approach

The concept of community has played a central role in the development of sociological discourses on Indian society. In general, 'community' has been associated with 'traditional' modes of social organisation (jati, village, religious sect) and opposed, implicitly or explicitly, to the individualism of modern western society. In the Dumontian view, for one, Indian forms of community are not just different institutionally but are based on a fundamentally different system of values. This kind of dichotomy is implicit in the anthropological understanding of the 'jajmani system', for example, as a non-monetary system for the exchange of goods and services within the relatively autonomous village. This system is counterpoised to the western market economy which is supposedly based on the activities of the rational self-seeking individual. For Dumont, the jajmani system is not merely an economic system but part of an entire cultural system, 'oriented to the whole' -- the expression in the economic realm of traditional community (Fuller 1989). This conceptualisation clearly derives from one of the foundational dichotomies of sociology, that which opposes community (*Gemeinschaft*), composed of primordial bonds of blood, territory, culture, and/or language, to modern society (*Gesellschaft*), which is but a collectivity of atomised individuals. Similar themes can be found in other segments of the sociological literature, whether the focus is on caste, kinship, the joint family, or peasant movements.

While much has been written about these kinds of community/individual and east/west dichotomies within sociology, there is another dichotomous pair embedded in this discourse which may be even more fundamental: the opposition between the realm of culture (= religion = hierarchy = caste) and that of economy (= materiality = production/exchange = class).<sup>2</sup> The reification of the jajmani system, for example, in which material relations of exchange are subsumed under caste/ community/ hierarchical structures (Fuller 1989), derives from a definition of Indian society as inherently 'cultural', i.e., not rooted in the material world. This in turn comes, at least in part, from colonial Indological traditions which emphasise the spirituality and 'other-worldliness' of Indian culture in explicit contrast to the materialism, rationality and 'this-worldliness' of western capitalist society (*a la* Weber). Although several efforts have been made to re-think such 'orientalist' constructions, the more basic culture/economy dichotomy on

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<sup>2</sup> I draw here on Deshpande's (1993) argument that 'culture' and 'economy' are held in a dichotomous relation within constructions of the nation in nationalist ideologies. It is certainly not accidental that this tension between 'modern' economy and 'traditional' culture is central to both nationalist and sociological discourses. Without completely buying into the Orientalism thesis, it is certainly arguable that this fundamental ideological axis (Deshpande 1993:22) itself derives from an older discourse about India which was developed in the context of colonialism.

which they are based -- which is not specific to the Indian context -- has not been challenged.<sup>3</sup> In fact, this dichotomy has been basic to much of sociological and anthropological theory right from its inception, probably stemming from the bifurcation of the social sciences into economics versus the rest. It also underpins one of sociology's central problematics, i.e., the relation between the realm of ideology, consciousness, beliefs, values (i.e., 'culture') and that of 'real' social or economic action and structures.<sup>4</sup>

One of the forms in which this central opposition between culture and economy appeared in the context of India was in the 'caste vs class' debate of the 1970s. Those who argued that 'caste' is the central organising principle of Indian society did not dispute the presence of class, defined as some kind of economic inequality, but argued that class 'cuts across' caste divisions and therefore is less salient with regard to identity formation and social mobilisation. Similarly, the class theorists did not deny the existence of caste but simply subsumed it under class hierarchy or dismissed it as an epiphenomenon or as a relic of feudalism. For both, caste was defined as some kind of socio-cultural unit or ideological system based on the religious principle of hierarchy, and class as an economic phenomenon (Upadhyia 1997). Under the terms of this debate, it was not possible to reverse the equation and understand class as 'cultural' or caste as 'economic', except in the most subsidiary way (e.g., the 'economic' appears as jajmani relations or as the 'dominant caste' with reference to land ownership).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the older sociological tradition, caste (= traditional culture) got defined in opposition to class (= economy).

There is another aspect of this conceptualisation of caste which is relevant here. Within much of the sociological literature, castes or jatis are defined not only externally in terms of their position within a hierarchical structure but also internally in terms of relations of kinship and marriage (and in the case of dominant castes, in their relation to land or territory). Jati as a kind of solidary unit made up of 'primordial' kinship-based units came to be equated with community, which in turn was identified as the locus of cultural tradition and identity. Even in the realm of politics, collective action is usually conceptualised in terms of caste or other ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see the debate between Prakash (1990, 1992) and O'Hanlon and Washbrook (1992); Ahmad's (1991) critique of Inden (1990); and Breckenridge and van der Veer (1994).

<sup>4</sup> This question itself presumes a separation and hence opposition (or at least, troubled relation) between the 'cultural' and the 'economic'. This is sharply visible for example in the long-standing debate between Marxist and non-Marxist sociologists on questions such as the development of capitalism and the origins of entrepreneurship (on whether economic or cultural factors are primary), or in the substantivist/ formalist debate within economic anthropology. Although more recently there have been various attempts to marry the 'economic' and the 'cultural' in social theory, or rather to transcend the dichotomy completely, it persists in various forms, as I argue below.

<sup>5</sup> The Marxist theoreticians of 'rural class structure' were equally to blame in taking a purely 'objective' view of class (perhaps because most were economists). More recently there have been a few attempts to understand class as a cultural phenomenon; for a review see Upadhyia (1997).

identities. In other words, politics also gets subsumed by caste (as in Dumont), and implicitly this kind of politics (the 'Indian') is juxtaposed to the 'other' variety which is supposedly based on individual interests or instrumental goals.<sup>6</sup>

The outcome of this theoretical trajectory has been the identification of 'culturally'-defined groups (ethnic, religious, caste) as the authentic units of social organisation in India. The communities which make up Indian society are understood in terms of such categories, which are based on 'real' social relationships and rooted in Indian cultural and religious traditions. Although the presumption that such communities -- whether villages, jatis or kin groups -- are characterised internally by harmony, democracy and solidarity has long ago been discredited, the founding concept of community itself has not been adequately contested. Instead, it has been given a new lease on life through recent communitarian writings that posit the existence of a 'real' submerged community which has been denied and repressed by a non-authentic and all-powerful state, itself a product of an imposed and alien 'modernity'. In this discourse, the community is the repository of traditional culture and humane values; the state and market relations threaten to decimate the community, which is what gives identity, meaning and anchorage to the individual. It is significant that in such writings, 'modernity' has also reappeared as the central trope around which an understanding of contemporary India must be constructed. The notion of community employed in such communitarian (or semi-communitarian) discourses clearly has its roots in the older sociological tradition, as I argue below.

### **The constructivist approach**

Recent work by a number of historians and anthropologists of Indian society takes a very different view by demonstrating that most of the communities we see today (religious groups, castes, tribes), and the identities on which they are based, are not survivals from pre-colonial times but are the creations of colonialism, politically constructed through the discourses and policies of colonial administration. These scholars (both historians and anthropologists) argue that caste and other community identities do not have roots in the hoary past but were in fact 'invented' quite recently. This 'constructivist' argument has brought the earlier substantivist theories of caste and community into serious question. Many of these writers follow Foucault in identifying the (colonial) state as the primary or sole source of such identities. Through its disciplining and authorising practices, the argument goes, the state in a sense *created* civil society in line with the demands of governing and controlling large populations.

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<sup>6</sup>Needless to say, politics does not apply to the 'inside' of the social unit (ie, within the solidary family, kin group, or jati), but only to the relations *between* various culturally-defined social units.



Perhaps the strongest statement of the 'colonial construction of identity' argument has been developed by Dirks, who argues that the colonial regime robbed the caste system of its former political base and reconstructed it as a primarily religious or cultural institution and as the 'authentic' basis of Indian society. Because of the operations of colonial discourses and the politicisation of caste and other 'community' categories, caste "...became a specifically Indian colonial form of civil society, the most critical site for the textualization of social identity" (Dirks 1997:135). This colonial project, which involved an "official colonial sociology of knowledge" (1997:133), was reproduced in academic writings on India, especially of the Dumontian variety (1997:123). He concludes that the "...forms of casteism and communalism that continue to work against the imagined community of the nascent nation state have been imagined as well" (1997: 135).

A number of scholars have developed this kind of argument in various ways and in different contexts. Here I refer only to a short piece by Dipesh Chakrabarty (1995), who draws on the work of several others and therefore provides a convenient summary of the constructivist position. He argues that colonial rule introduced the modern bureaucratic state into India, which employed the typical techniques of government, surveillance and control that have been identified by Foucault. India's people were measured, classified, and quantified through the censuses and other such information-gathering exercises in which invented community categories were central. Because governing practices entailed the counting and categorising of people in terms of collectivities, people began to see and organise themselves in terms of these categories, leading to the formation of new identities. As Sudipto Kaviraj (1992) has articulated it, pre-colonial communities which had 'fuzzy' boundaries were replaced with discrete categories which could be enumerated exactly and which claimed exclusive identification by their members. However, Chakrabarty suggests that this movement from 'fuzzy' to enumerated communities did not entail a complete change of consciousness for the people, who in their 'everyday lives' continue to have multiple or overlapping ethnic identities. Administrative categories produced the kinds of identities we see at work today, which are modern, public and imbued with political meaning, but these co-exist and interpenetrate with a more 'fuzzy' and private sense of community that exists, apparently, at the sub-political level (1995:3377). Chakrabarty argues that colonial governing practices reconstituted the meaning of 'community' or 'ethnicity', that people learned to participate in the public sphere through terms defined by the state, and that as a result we have a kind of modern ethnic consciousness in India in which the politics of cultural difference is primary (1995:3378). I return to examine this argument below.

### **Invention of tradition: the anthropological view**

As in the constructivist trend in the Indian literature, much of the recent work on ethnicity and nationalism within anthropology and other disciplines has moved away from substantivist

conceptions of identity and community to highlight the ways in which collective identities are 'constructed' and politically mobilised. This 'invention of tradition' (following Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) literature within anthropology has focused mainly on indigenous movements in the Pacific and North America and on ethnic conflicts in Africa and Europe. By deconstructing notions of authenticity and tradition with regard to modern identities and showing them to be products of specific historical and political processes, these studies have led to a re-writing of the concept of culture itself.<sup>7</sup>

Much of this work aims to critique what Appadurai has termed the 'primordialist thesis' of ethnic violence, which revolves around a concept of primordial group identities based on claims to shared blood, soil, or language (1997:140). Underlying this thesis is the idea that social collectivities possess a "...collective conscience whose historical roots are in some distant past and are not easily changeable but are potentially available to ignition by new historical and political contingencies" (1997:141). The primordialist thesis, found in much of the mainstream writing on ethnic strife in Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere, rests on a view of certain populations as 'infantile' and 'non-modern'. Appadurai refers to this kind of popular understanding of all sub-national movements as tribalist as the 'Bosnia Fallacy' (1997:21). Instead he argues that ethnicity should be understood as a historically constituted form of social classification that is "... regularly misrecognized and naturalized as a prime mover in social life" (1997:140). In this view, politically mobilised ethnic communities can no longer be seen as 'traditional' collectivities that have failed to be subsumed within the state/civil society model, but instead appear as very modern identities which have been formed in the course of (post)modern history. According to Appadurai, the burgeoning of ethnicities in recent years can be understood precisely as identity politics directed against the *state* (rather than originating in pre-state identities or loyalties). Such ethnic or 'culturalist' movements involve the "...conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics" (Appadurai 1997:15).

We now have a large number of studies which illustrate the complexity of such processes of mobilisation or creation of cultural difference. Hanson's (1989) work on the Maori of New Zealand, for example, suggests that the Maori 'traditions' that have been valorised in the current cultural revival are not indigenous but were constructed, drawing on colonial knowledge

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<sup>7</sup>Frequently cited work of this genre includes Handler (1988), Handler and Linnekin (1984), Hanson (1989), Keesing (1989), and Linnekin (1983, 1991). The seminal texts for this school of thought are Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (1991[1983]).

systems, in the process of resistance to European domination.<sup>8</sup> Thomas (1992), writing on several Pacific indigenous movements, similarly suggests that ‘cultural objectification’ is often a *reactive* process in which traditions are constructed around particular reified practices, symbols or identities *against* another kind of construction of identity. This is particularly true in the context of colonialism:

Where colonialism has had a more sustained and repressive impact, indigenous peoples may come to couch their identity and resistance in terms made available by the dominant: they celebrate and affirm what colonialist discourse and practice subordinate and denigrate (1992:216).<sup>9</sup>

According to this school of thought, it is no longer possible to presume that a social identity or tradition linked to a particular ‘community’ has an autonomous or authentic existence, and that it has been simply appropriated for political ends by an identitarian movement. Rather, traditions and identities are seen to be constructed in complex ways in an on-going process of cultural production, which includes politically motivated objectifications of culture, embodied in emblems of identity which represent the distinctiveness of the community or ethnic group. The process of objectification is a dialectical process in which “...dominant and dominated groups reify the attributes of both others and themselves in a self-fashioning process” (Thomas 1992:215). Even the realm of kinship, a seemingly autonomous domain, does not escape from this process, nor does religion, as is evident in the rise and near triumph of the politics of communalism in India. Thus, to understand the formation of any particular identitarian movement or social collectivity, one must look at its cultural specificities and the political and historical context in which it has arisen, and at the ways in which particular symbols or practices have been invoked and reworked by people in their strategies aimed at producing active political collectivities.

## **Politics of academic knowledge**

Although anthropologists have documented a number of instances of identity construction through inventions of tradition, not all have been conscious of the fact that anthropological and other academic texts and discourses themselves have been implicated in such processes. Yet it is now clear that the social science disciplines, especially anthropology (but history as well), have

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<sup>8</sup>Hanson takes a poststructuralist position to argue that there is no final social-cultural base against which authenticity can be judged, because the past is always refigured for the present. However, not all of the ‘invention of tradition’ theorists are so extreme.

<sup>9</sup>This is similar to Partha Chatterjee’s (1986) argument about nationalist discourse in India.



come to play a major role in the formation and stabilisation of political identities and authorisations.<sup>10</sup> The boundary between cultural or social analyses produced by academics and intellectuals, and the self-objectivisation by spokespersons of various communities or groups, is becoming increasingly porous (if indeed it was ever clear-cut). This interpenetration is manifested in various ways. As discussed above, the process of 'invention' of identities and traditions through the operations of colonial law or policies or by the writings of early amateur historians and ethnographers has been well-documented. A well-known example is the utilisation of anthropological texts (as well as the more recent active participation of anthropologists) in the construction of Maori traditions in the context of the 'Mana Maori' (Maori Power) movement in New Zealand (Hanson 1989). However, there has been somewhat less discussion of the continuing role played by the social sciences and history, through the media and instruments of the state, in the on-going *reconstruction* and representation of identities.<sup>11</sup>

At a more abstract level, as Spencer (1990) points out in an insightful article on Sinhalese nationalism, the relationship between academic and political discourses about identity has an even deeper origin than this: both anthropology as a discipline and nationalism as an ideology were born almost simultaneously from the same philosophical and political roots. The anthropological concept of culture derives directly from the writings of Herder and other German romantics, and anthropology shares some of its central concepts with the discourses of nationalism as well as racism: culture, tradition, community, and so on (Spencer 1990:290; cf. Friedman 1994, Chap. 4). Anthropological explanations of nationalisms in cultural terms are therefore

...fundamentally tautological, relying as they do on a set of assumptions about continuity, pattern, and boundedness that it is the very business of nationalism to assert or create .... nationalism not only preempts the anthropologist's use of terms such as 'culture', 'community', and 'tradition' but also occupies the anthropologist's discursive space on the cusp between cultures (1990:288).

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<sup>10</sup> Significantly, this issue has not been much discussed in the context of India in spite of the long-standing close relation between the social sciences and the state. Here this relationship has been explored primarily in the context of colonialism.

<sup>11</sup> This part of the discussion draws on a recent talk given by Thomas Blom Hansen at SNTD Women's University entitled 'The Politics of Cultural Analysis'. Hansen pointed out that there has been little work on how 'authorised' identities originally formed through, or in opposition to, governmental practices are lived and experienced by those so categorised. Politics involves not only the creation of identities but also their consumption, and identities on offer by dominant groups or the state are consumed selectively by their targets. He also suggested that the production of cultural identities may now be more democratic than ever, in that any aspiring leader can invent histories and appropriate salient symbols to mobilise an incipient community. However, the globalised electronic media is also playing an increasingly important role in the production and circulation of identities.

The dilemma outlined by Spencer has no real resolution, but he suggests that anthropologists recognise that "... we are arguing *within* the same world" as that of our subjects rather than from without (1990:290).

Anthropologists such as Appadurai have been troubled by the persistent interpretation of ethnic conflict in the media as 'tribalism', especially in the African context. Yet often the source of such interpretations has been anthropology itself. Besteman (1996a, 1996b) shows how the terrible carnage and disintegration of the Somalian state in the early 1990s was projected in the US media as the product of inter-clan warfare or 'tribalism', an understanding in which classical anthropological theories about African social organisation were deeply implicated. This evolutionist understanding of political violence, which attributes inter-group conflict to pre-modern, pre-state loyalties, precludes a more complex historical analysis which would take into account multiple cleavages in Somali society such as those of class and race, as well as the struggle for control over the Somali state which has been the recipient of massive amounts of US aid (including arms) since the 1980s. Besteman's discussion illustrates how anthropological 'knowledge', in this case the segmentary lineage system model, can be appropriated by other knowledge-producing agencies in the service of various ends. In this case, the media image of Somali tribesmen caught up in ancient clan rivalries and slaughtering each other with modern weapons served to justify US military intervention as a "late-20th-century civilizing mission" (1996a:123).<sup>12</sup>

### **Critique of constructivism**

The Somali case illustrates a more widespread process in which the substantivist view of ethnicity, deriving from the older Durkheimian anthropology, has become 'common-sense' understanding through its dissemination in the media. However, such conceptualisations of identity have also taken root within identity-based politics, especially those of 'indigenous peoples'.<sup>13</sup> As a result, new work stemming from the 'invention of tradition' thesis has been opposed by 'native' groups for calling into question the authenticity of their 'constructed' cultural identity and traditions. While the constructivist argument is on the surface directed against the common and more pervasive tendency to reify communities and identities, its broader political aim is to deconstruct nationalist and sub-nationalist ideologies. It is for precisely this reason that the 'invention of tradition' thesis has come in for heavy criticism recently, both from within and outside of anthropology. This debate, much of which has taken

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<sup>12</sup>For an interesting discussion of the relationship between journalism and anthropology, see Malkki (1997).

<sup>13</sup>The emergence of the politics of 'indigeneness' in the international arena is another important issue in which anthropology is implicated, but which cannot be discussed here.

place within the context of Pacific cultures, is perhaps the most interesting part of the literature and may be the most relevant to the Indian context.

A well-known example of such confrontation between the anthropologist's analysis and the self-definition of an indigenous group is the attack launched by Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask against anthropologists Roger Keesing and Jocelyn Linnekin. Trask criticised their 'invented tradition' arguments about Pacific islands cultures and identitarian movements (which suggested that local political leaders use reified and essentialised identities for their own ends) as a case of "hegemony recognizing and reinforcing hegemony" (1991:160, quoted in Briggs 1996:437). Linnekin's work on the invention of Hawaiian tradition was seen as an "...attack on Hawaiian cultural continuity that was staged precisely when Native resistance was beginning to enjoy limited success on issues of land rights and sovereignty" (Briggs 1996:437). White anthropologists such as Keesing were accused of seeking "...to take away from us the power to define who and what we are, and how we should behave politically and culturally" (Trask 1991:162, quoted in Briggs 1996:437). The irony in such debates is that the anthropologist generally seeks to represent his or her position as *more* radical than that of the local activist, on the ground that he/she is helping to 'de-colonise' the discourses with which such groups construct their pasts. But the other side sees constructivist theories simply as a re-assertion of the representational authority of scholars *vis-a-vis* indigenous groups:

Having assumed the right to create cultural forms and then impose them on dominated communities, whites have now asserted their authority to declare such constructions to be 'factitious' ... and to withdraw them from circulation without feeling the need to consult the communities that may have adopted these 'fictions' as part of their lived experience (Briggs 1996:438).

Briggs argues that the 'invention of tradition' scholars, mostly non-native, "...claim discursive authority by virtue of the way that they construct their own *distanced* position with respect to tradition" (1996:460). This authority is buttressed by the class, race and otherwise privileged positions of the scholars with regard to hegemonic knowledge systems, which render "...null and void claims to knowledge based on direct participation in processes of cultural transmission" (1996:461). There is, in other words, not a free market in interpretations of the past but a "hierarchical structuring of representations of tradition" (1996:461).

This kind of conflict stems from one of the contemporary 'predicaments of culture' (Clifford 1988) -- that the more 'culture' comes into everyday and political discourse ('multiculturalism', 'Indian culture', 'youth culture'), the more compromised the concept becomes for the discipline which had made it its central trope. Friedman (1992) poses this problem somewhat differently: The construction of identities requires the production of

historical schemes which valorise them: a meaningful universe of events and narratives is created by making history, or imprinting the present onto the past. But identities are also 'invented' by anthropologists through their own academic practices as much as by those involved in identity politics. The difference is that anthropology (and all academic praxis) is situated within a modernist discourse, which is based on objectivism -- the idea that there is a 'real', narrative history to which the scientific subject has access (1992:849) -- while the discourses of actors are derived from 'non-modernist' identity spaces. The notion of 'invented tradition' falls squarely within this objectivist model. But such a position can only be held from a stance of authority, which by now is increasingly unavailable to the anthropologist (Clifford and Marcus 1990), or to the historian.<sup>14</sup> The fact that both academics and actors are engaged in 'inventing' identities means that there will be an "...inevitable confrontation between Western intellectual practices of truth-value history and the practices of social groups or movements constructing themselves by making history" (Friedman 1992:837). In this conflict there can be no middle ground, because the strategy of truth-value on which modernist anthropological understandings are based is *as* political a strategy as is the construction of identities within political movements (1992:852). All constructions of the past are socially motivated, including the kind 'objective' history produced by academics.<sup>15</sup>

This debate raises a host of questions that cannot be discussed in detail here but which are critical to keep in mind while pursuing any academic research on identities or communities. In particular, it highlights the fact that local activists or political leaders, members of 'communities', and the scholars or journalists who are studying or writing about them (not to mention representatives of the state whose job it is to elicit information about them) construct their representations of those communities from different locations within a particular political-economic formation, and that such representations are bound to conflict with one another. Some anthropologists have tried to disown responsibility for how their work is interpreted and used beyond the academy by arguing that they have no control over what happens to what they write. But as Briggs (1996) argues, the problem here is not one of *misrepresentation* or *misuse* of

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<sup>14</sup> Friedman argues further that most work on ethnicity reflects the modernist deconstructionism of intellectuals who react against ethnic movements from a position of identity-less modernist subjects. This position ascribes truth and authority only to itself, the scientifically knowing subject, and divides the world of representation into objective truth vs. folk or ideological models of the world (1992:849).

<sup>15</sup> Friedman suggests that currently popular ideas about culture within anthropology, such as that culture is simply a negotiable code or set of signifying practices, are linked to a structure of self and a culture that are specific to capitalist modernity (1992:855): "Culture is supremely negotiable for professional culture experts, but for those whose identity depends upon a particular configuration this is not the case. Identity is not negotiable. Otherwise, it has no existence" (1992: 852). The central political problem here is that because [...] representations have other functions than that of representing, the modernist must necessarily appear as a spoiler...By adopting a modernist (i.e., falsificationist) paradigm, one has also engaged oneself in the politics of other peoples' self-representations (1992:856, note 3).

academic scholarship; it is an outcome of the structural relation between the subject-positions of the scholar and his/her subjects and their consequent conflicting claims to authoritative knowledge about the communities in question. This is a problem that has no solution as long as the scholar adheres to an 'objective' or value-neutral stance in which he/she refuses to take a political position with regard to the nationalist other political objectives of the particular 'community' or movement: the scholar's analysis of that community's culture as either invented or authentic is bound to have political implications, one way or the other.

While it may seem that such debates are purely academic and have no resonance in the real world, in fact they have burst into the political arena in a number of cases precisely because questions of authenticity, tradition and culture are crucial to contemporary social movements, especially those of indigenous groups. Interpretations of tradition and the past by anthropologists and others have been widely deployed to fight cases in the defense of 'native' rights, such as for land rights. In this context, the interpretation of what is 'traditional' or 'customary' can be pivotal. For example, Trask (1991:166) suggests that the U.S. Navy used Linnekin's (1983) work on the invention of Hawaiian tradition to justify its bombing operations on Kaho'olawe Island, because the thesis allowed them to challenge native claims that the island is of great cultural significance (Briggs 1996:462). As a result of movements of indigenous peoples around the world, especially in North and South America, Australia, and the Pacific, anthropologists who study such groups are no longer able to maintain an objectivist or modernist stance with regard to cultural identity. In fact, increasingly they find themselves pulled into the identity politics of 'their' communities, and many are required to espouse a position of 'anthropological advocacy' as a pre-condition of the ethnographic relationship (Albert 1997:57-8). Activists and organisations working in the defense of indigenous people's rights look to the anthropologist for knowledge that will further their own projects, which are usually based on a notion of cultural continuity. This kind of legitimation of such groups as political subjects in the international arena depends on their self-objectification as 'indigenous':

In this global 'culturalist' political environment, ethnographic discourse has become a strategic tool – a symbolic mirror (in identity reconstruction) and a means of legitimation (by scholarly recognition) (Albert 1997:59).

In such situations, anthropologists have been forced to shift from their cherished method of 'participant-observation' to a stance of 'observant participation' (1997:60).

Clearly, once all traditions are thought of as 'invented', it will become very difficult for subaltern groups, whose struggles now revolve largely around issues of identity and community rights, to fight for rights to land or livelihood on such grounds. Given the superior control over valued knowledge (embodied in written texts) by political and academic elites *vis-a-vis*



oppressed groups, this devaluation of their claim to authentic knowledge based on oral traditions and other such sources is not likely to be in their interest. Thus, contrary to the constructivists' argument that they contribute to the loosening of western hegemonic control over 'native' discourses, Briggs and other critics suggest that the invention literature in fact "...extends and legitimates scholarly control over the discourses of Others" (1996:463). This perspective, whose aim is to critique nationalist or sub-nationalist ideologies from a postmodern perspective, has its own politics, which must be understood within the wider context of the politics of subaltern groups.

The 'invention of tradition' thesis has also been criticised theoretically from within anthropology for its emphasis on the cultural processes of 'invention' without equal attention to the social and political context in which such inventions occur. As Rosenblatt (1997) puts it, while the past is read in terms of the present, the present also has a real historical connection with the past which places limits on how the past gets constructed:

When people 'invent' traditions as interested political actors, they do so in ways that are meaningful to themselves and others, out of existing practices, and with purposes that were shaped by a particular historical experience (Rosenblatt 1997:291).

He argues that the concept of culture needs to be retained (rather than jettisoned, as advocated by the post-structuralists) in order to provide a link between the meaningful practices of human agents and the structured political and historical situations within which they carry out their projects and struggles (1997:292). As Friedman puts it, the problem with the "...invention thesis is that it is self-contradictory. If all culture is invention then there is nothing with which to compare a particular cultural product, no authentic foundation" (1992:856, note 5).

### **Indian social science and everyday discourses of society**

Returning now to the problem of conceptualising the concept of community in Indian sociology, what insights can we draw from the debates discussed above? To begin with, they suggest that researching and writing about communities and identity formation involve complex theoretical, epistemological and political questions that are not easily resolved. These issues stem mainly from the multiple ways in which the discourses and practices of the academy and those of the 'real world' interpenetrate with and inform one another, especially with regard to concepts of culture and tradition. These complex interconnections are seen in the common historical origin and shared vocabulary of these discourses; in the dissemination of academic knowledge through the projects of the state into society and people's movements; in the conflicts and alliances that

have arisen between anthropological and local constructions of identity; and in the fact that community identities are built on notions of cultural difference and social continuity that are also the staple of anthropological and sociological theories.

The constructivist argument about Indian society has identified colonial discourses and practices as the source of modern identities, but by and large it has not been extended up to the present to examine the ways in which such identities continue to be politically constructed, nor does it foreground the relationship between academic knowledge and the knowledge practices of the state or social movements. In many ways, the relationship between social science and the state that was established under colonialism has not changed after independence. Although the population is no longer counted by caste in the census, it is regularly enumerated according to every other conceivable social criterion. The relation of these modes of classification to political issues such as reservation or to the calculations of political parties at election time is well known. The 'fixing' of community identities by the state evokes a political response by people in which categories are accepted, negotiated, or rejected. In this process new identities may be born while others die out or merge. Studies demonstrating the historical fluidity or recent origin of apparently deep-seated social identities such as 'Sikh' or 'Hindu' are numerous, but what is not often noted in these studies is the influence of academic writing in political processes of identity formation.

Yet it is clear that sociological understandings of caste-, religion-, and kinship-based social formations as the authentic units of Indian society are interdigitated with public and governmental discourses about the place of communities in Indian society. For example, the project of 'national integration' has been built upon the delineation of various tribes and castes in terms of certain cultural and/or physical attributes, and their display in books, museums, exhibitions, handicraft outlets, and on state ceremonial occasions. Annual national rituals include the performance of the 'folk' dances and songs of 'tribal' and other ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> The idea that the nation is made up of diverse and discrete communities ('unity in diversity'), which has been tied into the ideological project of Indian nationalism right from its inception, has been fully naturalised. This has been accomplished in part through the state-directed educational system, which disseminates sociological concepts such as caste, tribe, cultural diversity, and sanskritisation in history and social studies lessons. Adivasis and diverse regional groups get ethnicised in school textbooks, their cultural specificity designated by type of dress, food habits, and customs. As a result of such practices, substantivist, culturalist and essentialised conceptualisations of communities have become part of everyday understandings of the social

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<sup>16</sup>Significantly, the culture of the dominant anglicised middle and upper classes, who form the majority of spectators, is never displayed during such events.

world, at least among the educated middle classes. While the origins of such public conceptualisations of community are complex, it is not difficult to trace their circulation through official state documents and practices, education and the media.

The wide acceptance of such ideas is demonstrated in that fact that most incidents of inter-group violence are portrayed in the media as ‘inter-community’ conflict of some sort, rather than as stemming from some other kind of struggle (e.g., over land rights). For example, the ongoing incidents of violence perpetrated by the private armies of the landowning class on poor peasant and landless labourer groups in Bihar are usually represented as inter-caste conflict, as have been similar incidents in Andhra Pradesh when members of ‘dominant caste’ landowning groups have attacked landless labourers belonging to the scheduled castes. It is not difficult to see how sociology and social anthropology are deeply implicated in all such constructions, directly and indirectly.

Such ‘common-sense’ concepts of community clearly derive from the older ‘substantivist’ approach within sociology, which is equivalent to the ‘primordialist’ thesis about ethnicity against which much of the constructivist literature is directed. While constructivism has made inroads within Indian academia, it has not yet provoked much public debate or opposition, as in the cases cited from the anthropological literature above. However, the constructivist position in the Indian case still needs to be examined closely to determine whether it provides a more satisfactory theoretical approach to these questions, especially since some of the writers in this camp have been contributing to debates on communalism, secularism and other such issues.

### **From substantivism to constructivism and back**

As discussed above, Chakravarty (1995) puts forth the constructivist position regarding the hardening of community identities in India, but also argues that such modern identities co-exist with another kind of private and ‘fuzzy’ community. He then brings his discussion to bear on the debate on secularism by suggesting that as a result of colonial governing practices, cultural difference became central to Indian politics. This kind of cultural consciousness came into contradiction with the official state ideology of secularism put into place by Nehru, which ignored the “... *actual* culture of political practice in India where a religious idiom and imagination had *always* been very strongly present” (1995:3378; emphasis added). What we see here is the subterranean reproduction of the older sociological conceptualisation of community in Chakravarty’s analysis, a concept that flies in the face of his professed constructivist stance. He shifts easily from the Foucaultian position that the “...very structure of modern governmentality carries with it the seeds of ethnic bloodbath” to another, almost contrary, argument about the “...everyday religiousness of Indian political culture” (1995:3378). Rather

than following through with his insight about the hardening of ethnic or communal identities under colonialism *as a result of political practices* in order to understand present-day communalism, his desire to critique the Nehruvian ideology of secularism leads him to revert to the idea that Indian communities are at bottom religious, kinship-based, and rooted in cultural traditions – in other words, not political (and certainly not economic).<sup>17</sup>

Another version of this argument is provided by Partha Chatterjee, who in a recent paper (1998) has combined the substantivist notion of ‘community’ as based on particularistic ties of kinship (whether ‘actual’, extended or fictive) with the constructivist position. Even while arguing against the ‘primordialist’ conception of community found in the writings of Ashis Nandy and other communitarians, Chatterjee appears to fall back into the same trap of understanding collective action (e.g., against the state, as in the case of Calcutta squatters described by him) in terms of the mobilisation of pre-state or non-modern social relations. According to him, community is opposed to capital (the culture/economy dichotomy); community is also apparently opposed to state (culture/politics; cf. Das 1995). ‘Fuzzy’ or otherwise, the conception of community remains a substantivist one: it is a non-political (and non-economic) entity which, although it can act politically, is formed through processes that cannot be understood within the same frame of reference as can other collectivities such as classes, political pressure groups, or social movements. Even while arguing that ‘communities’ today have become “...some of the most active agents of political practice” (1998:282), Chatterjee apparently does not envision the construction of these communities themselves as a political process. Thus, we see here a tendency for substantivist understandings of community to get reproduced even within apparently constructivist positions. While constructivism should represent an advance over the earlier substantivist or structuralist ideas about Indian communities, it appears that in much of this literature community continues to be regarded as the primary social and political category, or site of social action, within civil society. Regardless of their ‘invention’ by colonialism, caste, religious or ethnic identities are credited with a certain social reality and cohesiveness that is itself not interrogated by these writers. In addition, a major problem is that multiple identities or subject positions cannot easily be encompassed within a theory which posits communities as concrete moral and social entities, set off against the state.

There are other problems with the kind of constructivist argument we see in the Indian literature, which can be illustrated by returning to Dirks’ (1997) thesis. Although Dirks (1997:134) explicitly distances himself from Foucault and Said, his theory suffers from the same faults that have often been pointed out in the case of the latter two: the absence of a concept of

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<sup>17</sup>Note the implicit culture/economy dichotomy in this formulation.

agency on the part of the colonised, an over-emphasis on knowledge systems and discourses of the state with less attention to the ways in which such discourses get played out in real social life, and lack of a concept of power tied to actual human agents (Ahmad 1991). While pointing correctly to the non-authentic nature of caste and communal identities, this kind of argument, while professing to be political, is in fact apolitical in that it fails to locate 'identities' within the politically determined subject positions of those who profess those identities. While arguing, again correctly, against the notion of caste as the centre-piece of Indian social structure, Dirks in effect reproduces a culturalist understanding of politics and the state. In this view, the state becomes an actor which, engaged in a grand disciplinary project, produces new identities, creates forms of knowledge, and reinforces and totalises its power through its ordinary functions of counting, registering, classifying, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion: more questions**

For historical reasons, including the particular history of sociological writing on Indian society, certain ideas about that society and its component communities have become fixed within a variety of discourses and have thereby come to form the basis of diverse social movements, political ideologies, and constructions of social phenomena. This is not to argue, following Dirks, that colonialism simply 'invented' caste which then took on a life of its own, i.e., that the categories made the people. Rather, it is to suggest that the concepts with which we (as academics and as people) think and understand the world have a history, as well as a present, which is closely bound up with multiple political processes, past and present, such as colonialism, nationalism, state-directed development, and social movements. By becoming more aware of the history and structure of these concepts we have at least a chance of moving outside of them and formulating a more satisfactory understanding of social and political processes. Till date, it appears that there are few intellectuals who are attempting to do this. Both communitarian and constructivist positions (in their various combinations and permutations, such as in the work of Veena Das, Ashis Nandy, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee) tend to valorise a given understanding of community as an authentic social unit and political actor, and to reproduce the older dichotomy in which community (= the cultural = authentic identity) is set off against the state as well as the market. Thus, in Indian social science and history writing as well as in more public and popular understandings, the 'community' continues

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<sup>18</sup> Ironically, while anthropologists such as Dirks have been enthusiastically engaged in the deconstruction of the older monolithic and reified concept of culture and reinventing it as mere 'signifying practices' which are fluid, contested and inherently political, many of the same scholars have embraced a reified understanding of the state (and of colonialism), its activities and cultural effects.



to belong to the realm of 'culture', and therefore has roots in the ancient past; it represents a genuine social formation as well as a major source of identity, even if it has been shown to have been 'invented' at some point in the past. Conversely, political and economic practices or formations perceived as non-community (such as the state, the market, classes) are less authentic (because non-cultural and therefore non-Indian?), and therefore are to be bracketed outside of the discourse of community.

It now appears that neither of two conceptualisations of community discussed above -- the traditional substantivist one nor the more recent constructivist one -- are adequate to grapple with the complex problem of how to understand ethnicity, community or identity politics. While each approach has its own problems, they share a larger common one: both reflect the view from the outside, or the objectivist stance, in which the analyst presumes him/herself to be apart from the object (subject) of discussion. In doing so the anthropologist or historian also assumes that the terms and concepts through which she writes form a separate universe of discourse, or 'meta-narrative', which can be used to analyse the narratives of the informants. This assumption ignores the diverse ways in which the discourses of the academy are interconnected with those of society at large, in politics and the state, as discussed above. It also completely elides the issue of the politics of academic knowledge which has been so sharply debated within and with anthropology. In general, those who write about Indian history and society, whether constructivists or not, refuse to recognise the political import of their knowledge products, perhaps because they have not yet been challenged by people's movements. They also largely fail to acknowledge their complicity with the various projects of the state. These are major issues that need to be raised and debated within Indian sociology if it is to reconstitute itself as a knowledge-producing system which is both politically committed and capable of yielding a better understanding of social and cultural processes in contemporary India.

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