On Crossing Boundaries: History and Sociology

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1. I begin with a truism. Scholarship has to be seen its social and cultural contexts. What one can do, and what one manages to do, depend on what the tradition nurtures, or at least on what it can be persuaded to accommodate.

2. The organizers of this workshop have asked me to comment on the historical dimension in the work of sociologists. I need hardly emphasise that many of the complexities of Indian society originated in the depths of time; and therefore attempts at understanding them have to try to comprehend the society in movement. Whether the "movement" we consider is stretched over a decade or over a millennium would depend on our sense of the problem, on the manner in which the question is posed.

3. To be sure almost every sociological enquiry has some contextualization in time, and in several cases this has been substantial. One must take note of several distinguished colleagues, ranging from G. S. Ghurye to T. N. Madan in this context. On the other side of the fence, among historians, Romila Thapar led the way in drawing perspectives from sociology and anthropology in her own work on ancient history, and it has been a broad movement even if we think only of Indian scholars.

4. Time is short, however, and I propose to illustrate the difficulties in considering societal processes through history with reference to the case I know best, my own. My being a sociologist located in a department of history was quite exceptional; but I have a professional

licence for examining the particular case, however exceptional it be, and to look for the general principles at work in that particular case.

5. I refer first to my training and work before I joined the Centre for Historical Studies at JNU, for this is pertinent to the discussion. Cornell University, where I did most of my graduate work in anthropology, carries an emphatically interdisciplinary orientation, and my coursework included not only courses in sociology but also others in social psychology and in philosophy of social science. My PhD thesis was a reconstruction of an "ethnographic present" for the Embu, an African people in Kenya. Later I did a long paper on political change in the society, analysing the extraordinary changes over a period of some sixty years, between the colonial arrival in the early 1900s and the time of my fieldwork, 1963-64. My sense of the past in this study was grounded in my informants' testimony and in the secondary literature from travellers and administrators.

My second study, in 1969, was located among three castes in a Punjabi town. For two of them, the sense of time came principally from my informants' testimony; for the third, the Ramgarhias, whose ancestors had been carpenters and blacksmiths, understanding their contemporary situation required greater attention to a variety of secondary sources; but I did no archival work.

6. In 1973, at the suggestion of Professor Romila Thapar, I was offered a faculty position in the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU. Promoting social history was part of this Centre's foundational charter, and they hoped that having a captive sociologist would help this initiative. In her own work, Thapar had found anthropological work on African societies suggestive for her

studies on ancient India; so my Africa background was also an element in my entering this Centre.

7. I spent nearly twenty three years at JNU. These were eventful years, in many ways stressful. Here I wish only to indicate the nature of the difficulties connected with my cross-disciplinary location.

Initially, the Centre suggested that I teach a course on "Social change in modern India" – and then left me to my own devices. It turned out that there were vast gaps (1) between the substantive foci, of their scholarly interests and of my equipment and interests, and also (2) in the scales of some of these foci: on one side a predominantly Marxist concern with such phenomena as capitalism, colonialism, and the national movement; on the other, the anthropological engagement with caste, village, tradition and modernity, and the like. Though both sets had been pursued within our university system, and both were concerned with the same society, our habits of learning, as much as the structure of our society, have long carried the stamp of segmentation. The air was thick with talk of interdisciplinarity, but there was scant conceptualisation that reached across these separate fields.

8. I have told this story before, so I shall spare you the details of my fumbling. It took me nearly six years to recognise the promise in the phenomenon of communalism. Sociological monographs took note of the line of separation between Hindus and Muslims in their respective localities, but it was almost always incidental to their main theme. Until the appearance of Ratna Naidu's study in 1980, I could not find anything substantial on this crucial aspect of our society by a sociologist.

Indian historians had written on communalism, but their "explanations", as of the late 1970s, seemed to me to miss the point. It seemed to me that the Marxist historians, like Professor Bipan Chandra, who wrote on communalism at length, had great difficulty in taking the whole dimension of "religion" seriously; indeed they were too sceptical of religious traditions to be able to comprehend the hold of these traditions on their faithful. I approached the issue by recognising the significance of religion as a cultural integrator in a great many societies, especially in the pre-industrial societies, and by exploring the long term consequences of certain kinds of abrasive counterposing. My focus was not on particular localities, or specific historical episodes, but on the general pattern of abrasive interactions between religious traditions; and I sought out evidence on this interaction through the widest range of historical junctures in search of a formulation of maximal generality. This led me, I thought, to grasp something of the logic of communalism, in the early 1980s, in a manner that went beyond what either sociologists or historians had done until then.

9. The sociologist draws his academic authority from what is observed and recorded during fieldwork; the historian from what she finds in the archives and other publicly available records. Without availing of the authority of either fieldwork or archives, I had developed a substantial, and a defensible, argument on "communalism". This sensitised me to the potential of questions which cut across the domains of both history and sociology, and which lay beyond the nets both of the fieldworking sociologist and of the archives-working historian.

10. In that vein, when in 1981 Professor Ravinder Kumar sounded me about a fellowship at Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, I thought I would attempt something more ambitious than the theme of communalism, namely to try to analyse what I saw as a "social crisis" in

contemporary India. My initial hunch was that this crisis arose in the lack of fit between India's indigenous institutions and those taken from the West; and that it was the malfunctioning of Western institutions in India that gave us a sense of crisis. To test the hunch, and to grasp the historical context of these Western institutions, I had to track these institutions back to their own beginnings, in the period before Columbus. This enquiry, comparing the two sets of traditions, Indian and Western, generated a set of studies published under the title Wages of segmentation. This attempt at considering two civilizations, comparatively, had been exciting enough to persuade me to bring a third civilization, that of China, into my comparative frame in recent years.

11. Let me return to my location in the Centre for Historical Studies at JNU. Hitherto I have concentrated on the ideas which guided my writing during these years. But this location had another aspect. It was clear to me immediately that the archives held the key for anyone who worked in, or close to, the area of modern history. The best students in the Centre for Historical Studies established connexions with their future research supervisors in the context of the M. A. seminar. A faculty member who directed them to a block of files which generated a satisfactory seminar paper would be the obvious guide for more ambitious work later.

12. I had never before worked in archives. I did spend a few days each in the musty environments of both the Delhi and the National archives, but I had no particular historical question to put to their treasures; and in the absence of such a question, I could see no point in spending hours wading through old files. Consequently, I was never able to offer a satisfactory M. A. seminar, one which would prepare students for future work as historians. This was a

major element in my choosing first to accept several years of administrative duties, and then to quit JNU three years before I need have done.

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13. Having outlined my case history, let me turn now to some general issues. First, why be interdisciplinary, across history and sociology or any other fields? In dealing with issues which have long been domesticated in a particular discipline, you do not have to meddle with another discipline. In describing, say, the structure of the caste system in a village, the resources of sociology are adequate; you do not need history or psychology or anything else. It is only when we engage with real life puzzles of some complexity that we are likely to generate the motivation to draw on the resources of another discipline. My account has referred to puzzles concerning communalism and the widespread sense of disorder in Indian public life in the early 1980s. If we take seriously questions which will not fit into our neat little disciplinary boxes, these may not be amenable to the kinds of evidence, concepts, and analytic routines that have long familiar in our particular discipline.

14. I mentioned communalism. Recently I spent a week in Lahore. In the Punjab University campus, I was taken to a class in philosophy, and a student in the class asked me a question: "We feel that there is a good deal common between India and Pakistan. Why then did we have the Partition?" Now the Partition literature is a booming industry today, but I do not think this literature can answer the question in the mind of this young man. An adequate response must go into the nature of the caste order, its capacity for both separating what is socially and culturally different and for integrating all that difference into a whole in the localities; and it must consider a string of historical junctures:

- the Saltanat and Mughal conquests; and their consequences for the conquered in their psychology and therefore in their myths and beliefs;

- the later hierarchies in the localities;

- the counterposing of these hierarchies with colonial ideas of even-handedness during the 19th century; and

- the subsequent mobilisations on enlarging scales: mobilisations which turned out to be most cost-effectiveness when made in terms of caste and religion.

15. Put more generally, in any attempt at bringing to coherent understanding the changing social and political complexities of a region as vast as South Asia, we need a bifocal vision, one that commands both a generalised insight into the logics of South Asian society, such as we may gain in sociology, and also a familiarity with the several historical junctures in which the logics worked themselves out – and were re-shaped -- in the process cutting the course that South Asian societies have taken through time.

16. So long as the questions we ask can be answered within the historical confines of India, the library resources available to us at present may serve us reasonably well. One notes, though, that historians routinely look through numerous archives in their search for sources. In principle the sociologist too can learn to work in archives and follow in the historian's footsteps; in a moment I shall turn to what this will take.

17. In case your questions take you outside India – say into the history of Europe or China – you will be quickly stopped in your tracks since you will discover more or less a void in our libraries. In my own work I have been grateful for what I could find on China at the Indian

Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla; but beyond that I have had to rely on the generosity of institutions in Paris, England, and Scandinavia. These countries have made the effort to build their libraries. Last year I arrived in Copenhagen, as a guest of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, with a list of fifteen titles in Chinese history which I had not been able to locate elsewhere. My host institution's librarian sat me down at the on-line catalogue of the Danish Royal Library. The library had thirteen of the fifteen titles in stock, and a fourteenth was on order. The thirteen books in stock were delivered to my desk two days later. Building resources of this order takes work -- and it takes long term investments.

18. My last point: interdisciplinary scholarship is good not because it is a special mark of virtue but because it is necessary for understanding the complexities of life as it is lived. Such scholarship needs certain habits of mind, and these include the determination to follow a trail of observation, thought, or argument wherever it might lead, regardless of disciplinary boundaries. The best time to acquire such habits of thought is early in life, and surely no later than in early post-graduate years.

19. Opportunities for absorbing these habits have to be built into the academic frameworks wherein our students spend their early post-graduate years. These opportunities can take the form both of exposure to courses and seminars in fields other than our own, and of co-supervision of students writing theses by more than one faculty member, being drawn from the several disciplines pertinent to the theme of research. This will need, of course, changes in habits of mind not only among students but also among teachers and administrators. That may be easier said than done; but is it impossible?